



The Gulf and the Changing of Paths in the Middle East

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Recently, Israel has improved its relations with the Gulf. This development was formalized via the Abraham Accords with the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Bahrain and the silent approval of Saudi Arabia. The normalization between Israel and the Gulf is the result of a process some 20 years in the making, as 27 years have passed since Rabin, Arafat and Clinton signed the Oslo Declaration of Principles, which for the most part is now inactive. The questions that arise are how these accords can potentially affect the regional balance and whether more accords are likely to come.

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After the status quo shifts of the Arab Spring, some of the Gulf states started considering Israel as a potential partner rather than as an enemy. Taking into account that an alliance between the Gulf states – with the exception of Qatar – and Iran is not an option for the nearby future, a formal relationship with Israel presented itself as a viable alternative. Given that informal cooperation had been in the works for the past decade, normalization recently came into the forefront. For the UAE and Bahrain, normalization with Israel paves the road to the prospect of further arms sales, to security expertise and intelligence sharing, as well as to a deeper encroachment in Washington's Middle Eastern strategy.¹

The Abraham Accords should not be compared to Israel's 1979 treaty with Egypt given the fact that the latter reduced the possibility of confrontation with the largest and leading Arab state at the time.² The 1950s Israeli Periphery Doctrine, which was premised on the perception that Israel was surrounded by hostile states such as Egypt, Syria and Jordan and needed to promote relations with non-Arab and non-Muslim countries and minorities in the Middle East, was brought back to the conversation due to the 2010s status quo change. The rise of Islamist movements after the Arab Spring, the ever present threat from Iran and the undermining of Turkish-Israeli relations led to the re-evaluation and extension of the doctrine and set the stage for normalization between Israel, the UAE and Bahrain.

Furthermore, following the Islamic Revolution of 1979, the UAE, Bahrain and Saudi Arabia shared a common enemy with Israel. Iran's expanding influence through proxy actors such as Kata'ib Hezbollah in Iraq and militias in Syria, Hezbollah in Lebanon and the Houthis in Yemen accounted for the need for change in the regional balance. The sense of change in the regional equilibrium seems to have been the most important factor in bringing the UAE and Bahrain together with Israel.³

As a result, on August 13, 2020, the UAE and Israel signed the Abraham Accords. Considered a US-backed initiative, both previous and present Washington administrations were skeptical of direct military intervention and regime change, embracing instead a more indirect approach in securing US interests in the Middle East. The UAE viewed Iran's involvement in Lebanon, Iraq, and Yemen as destabilizing for its influence in the region. By the same token, political Islam backed by Turkey and Qatar was also perceived by both countries as a threat that needed to be minimized. Given that Israel's airbases are located far from Iran, the deal could provide in the future with new options in the geostrategic area, considering that the UAE are located across the waters of the Gulf, which would be of highly strategic significance when taking into account striking distance against Iran's nuclear facilities. In addition, Israel and the UAE have benefitted from security cooperation and intelligence sharing in the past. For instance, in July 2018, an Emirati military delegation visited Israel in order to examine the F-35 aircrafts, purchased from the US.⁴ A month later, Israel and Bahrain normalized relations, making the latter the fourth country to move in this direction. The new relationship resembles the one between the UAE and Israel with complete normalization of diplomatic, commercial and security ties. Located in between Saudi Arabia and Qatar and close to Iran, Bahrain's monarchy — which rules over a Shia majority — accuses Iran of meddling in its domestic affairs and attempting to manipulate segments of the Shia population to destabilize and even overthrow the Sunni rule. At the same time, Israel seems for preserving the Sunni rule in Bahrain and the UAE, in an effort to maintain the poor state of relations between the two countries and Iran.⁵

Moreover, Israel shares the strongest conventional and non-conventional military capabilities in the region as Tel Aviv's strategy for assuring its longevity was based on the concept of the "Iron Wall", according to which strong military power would act as a deterrent. Although surrounded and outnumbered by its neighbors, Israel's forces make up for this with high-end cyber military capabilities and intelligence gathering. Hence, the deal could promote cooperation in security areas potentially benefitting all parties. What is more, the UAE would be more than keen on signing a deal to acquire an Iron Dome missile defense system, as it could counter Iran's ballistic missile arsenal. Furthermore, a deal for the F-35 with the UAE is in the works which could be cause for serious concern for Iran. Yet, it remains uncertain if the deal will materialize in the end.⁶ In addition, the UAE's prioritization of its domestic security capabilities is driven by the rise of Muslim Brotherhood ideologues, who have found safe haven

and support in Turkey. Meanwhile, Israeli PM Netanyahu benefits from the normalization deal in regard to his reelection prospects. In other words, Israel gets something for virtually nothing: formal relations with the UAE and Bahrain without giving anything to the Palestinians,⁷ leaving aside empty promises of halting land annexation.⁸

Saudi Arabia seems content with the normalization between Israel and its allies in the Gulf, even though the Sunni Kingdom has not joined these efforts, as it remains worried about jeopardizing its clout in the region. Saudi Arabia had previously emerged as a regional power against Iran in a period when Syria, Egypt and Iraq were on the sidelines regarding Middle Eastern affairs. As Saudi Arabia is home to the two holiest places for Muslims, Mecca and Medina, the Kingdom fears that the relations' normalization can threaten its leading role in the region. Furthermore, the Saudi hesitation to establish full diplomatic ties with Israel originates from fears rooted in the internal political opposition. More precisely, the clerical establishment in Saudi Arabia, which holds heavy influence in the country, stands against normalization with Israel. The Kingdom has stated numerous times that it would not pursue normalization until there was a peaceful resolution of the Palestinian question.⁹

As mentioned above, Netanyahu's declared intention to extend Israeli sovereignty further over the Jordan Valley may not jeopardize peace and cooperation between Israel, the UAE and Bahrain, but it would make it more difficult for them to ignore it. Given the fact that Israel was demonized by the Arab governments for decades, the public's opinion is not primed for supporting Israeli policies and is not prone to forget the past in spite of the new relationships. Nevertheless, without undermining the importance of the Abraham Accords, it is important to underline the fact that neither the UAE nor Bahrain have been particularly influential actors concerning the Israeli–Arab conflict. Although the UAE and Bahrain insist that they continue to support a peaceful resolution to the Palestinian question, both prioritized normalization over the previous relationship. For the time being, this is not the case for Saudi Arabia. This means that apart from the threat that Israel and Saudi Arabia share in Iran, the Israelis will need to produce something more for the Palestinian issue before the Saudis are able to agree on normalization.¹⁰

Finally, obtaining formal recognition by two Arab Gulf states, without any concrete return to the Palestinians is a major victory for Israel, as the issue of Palestine was always a point of contention between Tel Aviv and the Gulf.¹¹ With the direct involvement of the Gulf states in the resolution of the Palestinian issue waning, normalization with Israel seems now on the table for the rest of the region. To that effect, one could surmise that other Gulf states may eventually follow the UAE and Bahrain's lead in striking normalization agreements with Israel. Strengthening ties between Israel and the Gulf remains an important part of US geopolitical strategy and can lead to re-energized dynamics in the region. Nonetheless, an Iranian or Turkish response to this initiative remains to be seen, as any status quo changing action more often than not produces a reaction from all affected parties.¹²

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