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The “Abraham” Agreement: normalization of relations or announcement of an existing Emirati- Israeli alliance?

Unit for Political Studies

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Unit for Political Studies

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On 13 August, the White House announced that it had reached what it referred to as a "historic" peace agreement between the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Israel. President Trump published the text of the joint statement for the agreement via Twitter, where it was said that "President Donald Trump, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, and Crown Prince Muhammad bin Zayed of Abu Dhabi conducted talks today and agreed to a complete normalization of relations between Israel and the UAE." During his daily press conference, Trump announced that the coming weeks might see the conclusion of more peace deals, adding that he would have wanted the agreement to be named after him, if not for fear of media reprisals. The deal, having brought Israeli-Emirati ties public and laid the groundwork for their further development openly and unabashedly, was eventually dubbed the "Abraham" Agreement.

History of Emirati-Israeli Relations

The agreement announced by President Trump serves to legitimize ties, both public and confidential, spanning nearly two decades between the Emirates and Israel in fields of security, military, commerce, and the economy. Abu Dhabi's Committee for Vital Establishments and Facilities, responsible for safety and security, signed a contract valued at \$816 million in 2008 with AGT International, a Swiss company owned by Israeli businessman Mati Kochavi, for the purchase of surveillance materials for vital infrastructure in the Emirates, namely oil and gas facilities.⁽¹⁾ The very same company provided Abu Dhabi with three drones in an attempt to strengthen the latter's intelligence and security capabilities.⁽²⁾ It also provided police forces in Abu Dhabi with a central security surveillance system known as Falcon Eye, work beginning officially on the project in July 2016.⁽³⁾

In August 2018, the UAE purchased advanced cellphone hacking technology from the Israeli NSO Group to surveil its detractors both at home and overseas, as well as those considered to be adversaries—namely journalists and intellectuals.⁽⁴⁾ In January 2020, Amnesty International demanded that Israel cease granting export licenses to the group, whose products have been used in attacks described by the organization as "vicious" against human rights activists in numerous states, including the UAE.⁽⁵⁾

Militarily, the UAE conducts many joint exercises side by side with Israel,⁽⁶⁾ including "red flag" exercises, an advanced aerial drill supervised by the U.S. Air Force.⁽⁷⁾ In March 2017 and April 2019, the UAE Air Force participated in military exercises known as *Iniohos* in Greece, where Israel was also present.⁽⁸⁾

1 Nissar Hoath, "AGT wins two government security contracts," *Emirates* 24/7, 2/3/2008, accessed on 13/6/2020, at: <https://bit.ly/2UG5C5z>

2 Uri Blau & Avi Scharf, "Mysterious Israeli Businessman Behind Mega-deal to Supply Spy Planes to UAE," *Haaretz*, 21/8/2019, accessed on 14/6/2020, at: <https://bit.ly/3e0AdCH>

3 "Abu Dhabi Tutlaq Niz m "Ayn al-Saqr" al-'Amni li-Muraqabat al-Madina", *Asharq Alawsat*, 14 July 2016. Accessed 14 June 2020 via <https://bit.ly/2C600vc>; "Markaz al-Tahakkum" Yutliq "Ayn al-Saqr" fi Abu Dhabi", *Emarat Al Youm*, 14 July 2016, Accessed 16 June 2020 via <https://bit.ly/2C5ovsg>.

4 David D. Kirkpatrick & Azam Ahmed, "Hacking a Prince, an Emir and a Journalist to Impress a Client," *New York Times*, 31/8/2018, accessed on 17/6/2020, at: <https://nyti.ms/3eo5DTT>

5 Isra'il: Awqifu Tasdir Majmu'at NSO "li-Baramij al-Tajassus ila Muntahiki Huquq al-Insan", Amnesty International, 14 January 2020, Accessed 18 June 2020 via <https://bit.ly/30UecSc>.

6 "United Arab Emirates air force participates in first Red Flag," U.S. Air Force, 24/8/2009, accessed on 18/6/2020, at: <https://bit.ly/2BiMOMA>

7 "Israeli allies fly with U.S. forces at Red Flag," U.S. Air Force, 22/7/2009, accessed on 19/6/2020, at: <https://bit.ly/3daKsD3>

8 Gili Cohen, "Israeli Air Force Holds Joint Exercise with United Arab Emirates, U.S. and Italy," *Haaretz*, 29/3/2017, accessed on 14/6/2020, at: <https://bit.ly/30G4m6g>; Anna Ahronheim, "Israel Air Force in Greece as part of Iniohos 2019," *Jerusalem Post*, 8/4/2019, accessed on 14/6/2020, at: <https://bit.ly/3f17JDL>



In order to guarantee safe navigation in the Gulf, Israeli military relations with the Emirates have deepened, especially after the May 2019 attacks on oil tankers near the port of al-Fujaira. In August of the same year, former Israeli Minister of Foreign Affairs Israel Katz announced that Israel had become part of “the international alliance for the security and protection of international shipping and guaranteeing the safety of maritime passageways”⁽⁹⁾ established by the United States which includes Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain, Britain, Australia, and Albania and aims to strengthen the safety and security of commercial vessels that transit through the maritime passages.⁽¹⁰⁾

On the level of diplomacy, culture, and athletics, Emirati-Israeli normalization has been a notable advancement in recent years. In October 2018, the Israeli Minister of Culture and Athletics, Miri Regev, made a public visit to Abu Dhabi.⁽¹¹⁾ At the same time, the Minister of Communications, Ayoob Kara, participated in the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) Plenipotentiary Conference, held in Dubai. Israeli Minister of Intelligence and Foreign Affairs, Israel Katz, made a visit to Abu Dhabi in July 2019 to attend an environmental conference organized by the United Nations. A delegation from the Israeli Ministry of Justice, led by Deputy Attorney General Dina Zilber, also visited Abu Dhabi to participate in an international anticorruption conference in December 2019. Israeli delegations, likewise, have appeared at international sporting events as well as at international cultural, economic, and scientific conferences in Abu Dhabi and Dubai.

Ties between the UAE and Israel, public and confidential, have taken a rapid turn in recent months. . On the 12th of this past June, Israeli newspaper *Yedioth Ahronoth* published an article by the Emirati ambassador to the United States, Yousef Al Otaib, titled “Annexation or Normalization”⁽¹²⁾. The article came out a mere three days after an Emirati aircraft landed at Ben Gurion⁽¹³⁾ carrying, the UAE said, COVID-19 relief cargo for Palestinians, in a step aimed at concealing the level of normalization between the two parties. The Palestinian Authority refused to accept the aid, on account of the UAE’s lack of coordination with them on the matter⁽¹⁴⁾. On the 17th of the same month, the Emirati state minister for foreign affairs, Anwar Gargash, took part remotely in the annual conference for the American Jewish Committee and gave a speech, in which he said that “communication with Israeli is very important and will lead to better results than other courses taken in the past.”⁽¹⁵⁾

As such, it might be said that the latest agreement symbolizes a sort of summit in the long course of relations between the two states. Boaz Bismuth, editor-in-chief of *Israel Today* and a confidante

9 “Israel involved in US-led naval mission in Strait of Hormuz — foreign minister,” *Time of Israel*, 6/8/2019, accessed on 16/6/2020, at: <https://bit.ly/3d4D643>

10 “Tahaluf Himayat al-Milaha fi al-Khalij yabda’ Muhammadiyah min al-Bahrain”, *Al-AIN*, 7 November 2019, accessed 16 June 2020 via: <https://bit.ly/2YF6QPN>.

11 Wazira Isra’iliyya Tatajawwal Dakhil Masjid al-Shaykh Zayid fi Abu Dhabi, *Al-Quds Al-Arabi*, 29 October 2018, <https://bit.ly/37Kcwfp>.

12 Yousef Al Otaib, “Annexation will be a serious setback for better relations with the Arab world,” *Ynet News*, 12/6/2020, accessed on 14/6/2020, at: <https://bit.ly/30HBefg>

13 Al-Imarat ‘an Ta’irat al-Musa’adat al-Thaniya: Hammuna Da’m al-Filastiniyyin li-l-Takhfif min Wata’at Ja’ihat Kuruna, *CNN*, 10 June 2020, accessed 17 June 2020 via <https://cnn.it/2zFx8Jp>.

14 Ali Sawafta and Alexander Cornwell, Palestinian PM says not informed of new UAE aid fight via Israel, *Reuters*, 9 June 2020, accessed 17 June 2020 via <https://bit.ly/37OmSv7>.

15 <https://bit.ly/37OmSv7>



of Netanyahu, described the agreement saying that “the UAE, once Israel’s mistress of two decades, now become its legal spouse in public.”⁽¹⁶⁾

Gradual normalization in and of itself, in fact, was the product of an Emirati conception of the UAE’s standing and role in the Gulf and greater region, its relations with the United States, as well as the necessity of entering an alliance with Israel, who shares the very same set of considerations: first, the danger posed (to both) by democratic transition in the region; second, regarding Iran as the primary enemy; third, the necessity of containing Turkish influence; fourth, the fear of expansion among Islamist movements, even moderate strands, and the use of intimidation against them; and fifth, the need to work together within Washington to affect the American administration’s policies toward the same ends—so as to avoid a repeat of, for example, the position taken by the United States on Mubarak during the January Revolution or of agreements such as the Iran nuclear deal. The Palestinian issue, on the other hand, is not on the agenda at all; the UAE and Israel both consider Palestinian resistance to be terrorism and President of the Palestinian Authority Abu Mazen’s stubborn attachment to remaining international precedents and decisions harmful to the so-called “peace process.”

It was clear that American cover was insufficient for the UAE’s regional expansion to control ports on the Red Sea seaports, along the Horn of Africa and Yemen, and on the Mediterranean, through intervention in Libya. Such expansion, rather, required a strong regional ally such as Israel.

Details of the Agreement

The trilateral joint statement emphasized that normalization of relations between the United Arab Emirates and Israel will be complete; delegations from both parties will meet in the coming weeks to sign secondary treaties covering a wide range of issues, including the establishment of embassies and completing agreements related to investment, tourism, direct flights, security, communications, technology, energy, healthcare, culture, and the environment. In a blatant attempt to create the impression that the UAE won some kind of victory through the agreement, the joint statement indicated that Israel will delay its announcement of the annexation of Palestinian lands per the Trump plan, despite being aware that postponing the annexation announcement had been previously decided for reasons related to the governing coalition in Israel and to Trump’s stance on the issue. During the press conference he called immediately after the joint statement’s release, Netanyahu stressed his commitment to the annexation project and that the possibility of making the decision to carry it out, at the right time, is still on the table.

It is true that the vindication in and of itself is useful for Israel, encouraging it to threaten to annex additional Palestinian lands in the future and suspend the threat in exchange for another Arab state joining the process of normalizing relations. What is also true is that normalization, coming under the worst Israeli prime minister with regard to Palestine, is a gift to Israel’s right wing, apart

¹⁶ Boaz Bismuth, Peace for peace: treaty with UAE changes the historical equation”, *Israel Hayom*, 13 August 2020, <https://www.israelhayom.co.il/article/790921>.



from the one-sided withdrawal from an Arab peace process that has stipulated the establishment of a Palestinian state prior to normalization, along the 4th of June borders, with Jerusalem as its capital and a right of return for Palestinian refugees—an initiative that has in and of itself included numerous concessions.

Immediately after agreement was reached, Netanyahu charged the head of the National Security Council, part of the Office of the Prime Minister, Meir Ben-Shabbat, with leading the Israeli committee to continue enacting the agreement as swiftly as possible. Netanyahu also decided to send the head of Mossad, Yossi Cohen, who played a major role in the reaching of this agreement and continues to enjoy close relations with UAE leadership, to Abu Dhabi to conclude the peace treaty to be signed at the White House in the coming weeks.

What Israel gains from the agreement

Israel places high importance on achieving normalized relations with Arab states. In addition to their latent desire to procure legitimacy for the armed theft of Palestine, Israel still strives to normalize and strengthen its relations and conclude peace agreements with Arab states, especially under the leadership of Netanyahu who has overseen one of the most right-wing, fascist governments in Israel's history, while Israel continues to strengthen its settlement activity and ethnic cleansing as a prelude to annexing as much occupied Palestinian land as possible. Netanyahu continues to repudiate the notion of “land for peace” called for by the 2002 Arab peace initiative, in favor of “peace for peace.” Netanyahu realizes that, by normalizing relations and concluding peace agreements with Arab states before a solution to the Palestinian issue is reached, he can deprive Palestinians of one of the most important components of power, isolate them from their Arab neighbors, and make it easier for Israel to marginalize their cause, single them out, break their will, and force surrender upon them.

Under Netanyahu's leadership, Israel continues to deny the fact that the Palestinian issue is at the core of the Arab-Israeli conflict, and it seeks to locate interests it has in common with many ruling Arab regimes without solving the Palestinian issue—against, for example, the “Iranian danger,” which it considers the common enemy; forces for democratic change in the Arab region; and Islamic movements of all types. Therefore, signing a peace agreement with the UAE and full normalization of relations between the two represents a major accomplishment for Israel, as well as a clear endorsement of its positions, policies, and practices vis a vis the Palestinian issue, including:

- The attempt by Israel and the American administration to settle the Palestinian issue and force the Palestinian people into surrender by way of the American president's so-called “Deal of the Century” which adopts the Israeli right's extremist view toward solving the Palestinian issue in all its parts, namely legitimizing and codifying settlement activity in the West Bank and occupied East Jerusalem;
- The American administration's decision to recognize Jerusalem as the capital of the occupying state and move its embassy there, so as to settle the issue of Jerusalem;



- Strengthening Jewish settlement in the occupied West Bank and Israel's ongoing confiscation of Palestinian lands in the West Bank for distribution among Jewish settlers;
- Netanyahu's continual seizure of large swaths of occupied Palestinian land for Israel;
- Continual attacks by Jewish settlers against al-Aqsa Mosque, as well as Israeli policies aimed at dividing up the mosque temporally and spatially, in preparation for the construction of the so-called Temple of Solomon on its ruins.
- In addition to these considerations linked to the Palestinian conflict, Israel has placed great importance upon its relations with the UAE, attempting in particular to elevate ties to the level of alliance. A set of factors contributed to the decision to strengthen ties with the UAE, the most important of which include:
 - The UAE forms part of an Arab axis, in addition to Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Jordan, and Bahrain, with influence upon many Arab states. Israel hopes that signing this deal will encourage other Arab states to follow the Emirates' example. In fact, Israel has been an unofficial part of this axis and now seeks to make its presence public and legitimate.
 - Israel hopes that the peace agreement will lead to an influx of investment from the UAE and the Gulf and, in turn, aims to increase its exports to the UAE and onward to other Gulf states in a variety of fields, namely cybersecurity, espionage-related services, advanced technology, and military supplies. Israel also seeks to grow the activity of Israeli companies and establish branches in those places.
 - The UAE plays a regional role beyond its borders which is generally in agreement with Israeli-American interests in the region and the standpoint of the Arab axis, in direct contradiction with forces for democratic change in the Arab region.
 - The UAE, by way of security coordination between Abu Dhabi and Tel Aviv, will constitute an advanced outpost for conducting espionage against Iran and monitoring its movements.

Summary

The United Arab Emirates concluded a peace agreement with Israel following American recognition of the annexation of Jerusalem and during an unprecedented phase of settlement expansion. It is well aware that Netanyahu's policies are the worst with regard to the rights of the Palestinian people, rejecting United Nations resolutions, international law, Arab League decisions, and the Arab Peace Initiative, and even contradicting the UAE's previously stated positions on the Palestinian issue and the Arab-Israeli conflict. With that, Emirati leadership has blatantly sided in favor of the Israeli project of neutralizing the Palestinian issue, so as to protect its security, grow closer to Washington, and realize its regional agenda—in correspondence with that of Israel—of upholding despotism and preventing democratic transition. Regimes arising from the will of the Arab people, after all, signify a threat to them both.