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The Negev Meeting: Did Israel Fail to Meet its Objectives?

Unit for Political Studies

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Unit for Political Studies

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The foreign ministers of Israel, the US, Egypt, Morocco, the UAE and Bahrain held a meeting at Sde Boker Kibbutz in the Negev on 27 - 28 March 2021. The Minister of Foreign Affairs of Israel, Yair Lapid, had called for the meeting in the aim of creating an Israeli-Arab alliance under American sponsorship,¹ to confront the Iranian nuclear project and its regional policies. This step clearly aims to transform the main conflict in the region from the conflict between the Arabs and Israel - which began with the rise of the Jewish national project since before 1948, and the appropriation of Palestine and other Arab lands - to a conflict between the Arabs and Israel in one camp, and Iran in the other.

The Agenda

The meeting was prepared in haste, with a last-minute Egyptian decision to attend and Jordan declining the invitation. The ability to hold the meeting, in and of itself, represents an achievement for Israel, but it is noteworthy that no joint statement was issued by the conference. This indicates disagreements often related to the formulations between the participating parties, especially between Egypt and Israel, and to the inability of Israel to impose its agenda on the meeting, nor to persuade Egypt to be a party to an Arab-Israeli alliance against Iran. In addition to the Iranian issue, the conference discussed other issues of particular interest to Egypt and Morocco, the most important of which is the repercussions of Russia's war in Ukraine on the prices of oil, wheat, and other basic consumer items, which are expected to be significant in Egypt. The issue of Western Sahara has also returned to the fore with force since the administration of former US President Donald Trump decided to recognize Morocco's sovereignty over it in 2020, in exchange for the normalization of relations with Israel. Although the Israeli Foreign Minister announced that the foreign ministers had agreed to hold a regular meeting, at least once a year, it is unlikely that this will happen given the fragile ground on which the meeting was held, and the prevailing state of "liquidity" in the region.

Towards a Security Alliance

In opposition to reviving the nuclear agreement between Iran and the working group countries, Israel has exerted great pressure on the Biden to not restore it. However, this effort seems to have failed and negotiations between Iran and Western countries continue. They are close to declaring an agreement that will see Iran return to its nuclear commitments in exchange for lifting the bulk of the US sanctions. With the return to the nuclear agreement approaching, Israel has redoubled its efforts to strengthen relations with a number of Arab countries, especially those with which it signed the Abraham Accords, in 2020, looking for common ground to establish a political and security alliance between Israel and some Arab countries against Iran. Israel has come a long way in this regard; Not only in the context of normalizing its relations with the UAE, Bahrain and Morocco, but also in terms

¹ Jonathan Liss, "The summit did not pledge to make statements against Iran, but discussed defensive cooperation," *Haaretz*, 28/3/2022, accessed on 3/4/2022, at: <https://bit.ly/3K2sap2>. [Hebrew].



of upgrading these relations to the point of alliance. This is clear from the recent increase in the number of visits paid by Israeli security officials to these countries, during which security cooperation agreements were signed and joint military exercises were organized.

Particularly remarkable was the enthusiasm of the Emirates and Bahrain, whose public relations with Israel have clearly deepened during the last year following years of secrecy. Israel has exploited these two countries' fear of Iranian policy in the region to secure their justification of the alliance with Israel to enhance security and military cooperation, especially in confronting Tehran. But the Israeli-Emirati understanding goes beyond that to working to prevent a recurrence of the Arab revolutions, as well as standing together against US attempts to interfere in what it considers the internal affairs of its allies, such as human rights issues.

The former head of the Israeli Mossad, Yossi Cohen, visited the UAE on 18 August 2020, and during his visit, he met with the Emirati National Security Adviser, Tahnoun bin Zayed, to discuss "prospects for cooperation in the security fields."² In March 2021, the UAE Defense Advanced Technology Group (EDGE) signed a memorandum of understanding with Israel Aerospace Industries to develop joint security and military production between the two countries, and build an advanced defense system against unmanned aircraft.³ In November 2021, the Head of the Directorate for International Defense Cooperation (SIBAT) Yair Kulas, visited the Dubai International Airshow, accompanied by seven Israeli security, military and cyber companies to enhance the joint security and military production between the two countries, and to design and manufacture unmanned ships capable of carrying out anti-submarine attacks.⁴

Moreover, Yossi Cohen visited Bahrain on 6 May 2021, to facilitate security cooperation between the two countries.⁵ On 2 February 2022, Israeli Defense Minister Benny Gantz visited Bahrain and signed a joint memorandum of understanding with the Bahrain Defense Force in the field of military cooperation.⁶ On 12 February 2022, the Bahraini Ministry of Foreign Affairs confirmed the appointment of an Israeli liaison officer in Bahrain, as part of arrangements related to the establishment of an international coalition to "secure freedom of navigation in the territorial waters of the region."⁷ On 9 March 2022, the Israeli Army Chief of Staff, Aviv Kochavi, visited Bahrain, where he discussed coordination and security cooperation between the two countries.⁸

² "Tahnoun bin Zayed receives Mossad chief Yossi Cohen," *Emirates News Agency - WAM*, 18/08/2020, accessed on 31/3/2022, at: <https://bit.ly/3J1kTVe>.

³ "Agreement between UAE's "Edge" and an Israeli company to develop a defence system against unmanned aircraft," *Al-Arabiya Net*, 11/3/2021, accessed on 31/3/2022, at: <https://bit.ly/36YILLG>.

⁴ "Edge Announces Strategic Deal with Israel Aerospace Industries to Develop Advanced Unmanned Surface Vessels," *Edge Group*, 18/11/2021, accessed on 31/3/2022, at: <https://bit.ly/3qQ1d06>

⁵ "The head of Mossad visits the Kingdom of Bahrain," *Bahrain News Agency*, 6/5/2021, accessed on 31/3/2022, at: <https://bit.ly/36WY9Z0>.

⁶ "The Commander-in-Chief of the Bahrain Defence Force receives the Israeli Minister of Defence," *Bahrain News Agency*, 3/2/2022, accessed on 31/3/2022, at: <https://bit.ly/3qPVnMe>

⁷ "Foreign Ministry: Attaching an Israeli Officer Comes within the Framework of Arrangements related to an International Coalition," *Bahrain News Agency*, 12/2/2022, accessed on 31/3/2022, at: <https://bit.ly/3ITvQYE>.

⁸ "The Commander-in-Chief of the Bahrain Defence Force Receives the Chief of Staff of the State of Israel," *Bahrain News Agency*, 10/3/2022, accessed on 31/3/2022, at: <https://bit.ly/3NzgNXG>.

On 24 November, 2021, Gantz made his first public visit to Morocco, during which he and his counterpart, Minister Delegate in charge of the National Defense Administration, Abdellatif Loudiyi, signed the first security agreement between the two countries, opening the door to the Israeli army to sell arms to Morocco. The establishment of a joint committee was agreed upon for the purpose of exchanging intelligence information, research and joint military training.⁹

In November 2021, Emirati, Bahraini and Israeli forces participated, for the first time, in a joint military exercise on maritime security operations in the Red Sea with the US Central Command (the Fifth Fleet).¹⁰ In February 2022, 60 countries, including Israel, along with the UAE, Bahrain and Morocco, participated in naval exercises in the Persian Gulf and the Red Sea, organized and supervised by the Central Command of the US Army.¹¹

Israel has taken advantage of several variables to accelerate rapprochement with some Arab and Gulf countries, especially in confronting Iran, most notably:

- First, the increasing talk about the decline of US interest in the Gulf and the Middle East, with the United States gradually withdrawing region as it turns its attentions to China and Southeast Asia. Despite this talk so far proving to be untrue, Israel has been investing in the Gulf countries' fears, which of a diminishing US commitment to the security of the region as it seeks to lift sanctions on Iran.
- Second, the imminent return of the nuclear agreement between Iran and the working group, with the consequent lifting of sanctions on Iran, which would increase its influence and role in the region, and also its power, especially as it approaches the transition to a “nuclear threshold” state.
- Third, the escalation of attacks by Iran's allies, especially the Houthis, on strategic installations and sites in Saudi Arabia and the UAE to push these countries to approach the Israeli position, and to form an alliance with it against Iran.

Tensions between the United States and its Allies

The Negev summit came at a time when the US relations with a number of its allies in the Gulf - especially Saudi Arabia and the UAE – have turned sour due to its neutrality in the Ukraine crisis, and its rejection of Washington's request to increase its oil production to increase pressure on Russia.

A chill has clouded US relations with both Saudi Arabia and the UAE since the Biden administration came to power in January 2021, against the backdrop of President Biden's reluctance to communicate with the Saudi Crown Prince, and his approval of the publication of a US intelligence bulletin holding

⁹ Abd al-Salam al-Shamekh, “Morocco and Israel Sign a Defence Memorandum for Cooperation in Military Industries and Sales”, *Hespress*, 24/11/2021, accessed on 3/31/2022, at: <https://bit.ly/3qPbmKv>.

¹⁰ “US, Israeli, Emirati, Bahraini manoeuvres in the Red Sea,” *Al-Arabiya Net*, 11/11/2021, accessed on 31/3/2022, at: <https://bit.ly/3uKU5Dc>.

¹¹ “60 countries are maneuvering militarily in the Red Sea,” *The Independent Arabia*, 3/2/2022, accessed on 31/3/2022, at: <https://bit.ly/3iMrPuC>.



him responsible for ordering the assassination of journalist Jamal Khashoggi. In addition, the United States removed the Houthis from the list of terrorist groups and withdrew military support for Saudi Arabia in its war against the Houthis in Yemen. Furthermore, its intention to remove the Iranian Revolutionary Guard from the list of terrorist groups, in the event of an agreement to revive the nuclear agreement with Iran, despite the Guard providing Iran's allies in the region, most prominently the Houthis, with drones and long-range missiles that are used to bomb strategic targets in Saudi Arabia and the UAE.

Egyptian Reservations

Egypt hesitated to participate in the Negev meeting and was the last country to respond to its invitation. Cairo believes that this meeting will give Israel a leading role in the region at its expense. It appears that it has reservations about Iran being the focus of the meeting. In addition, Egypt is not satisfied with an Israeli proposal to build an air defense system in a number of Arab countries to counter drones and ballistic missiles that could target Israel, as well as establishing points and offices for its security services in many Arab countries, under the cover of security and intelligence coordination. Despite Egypt's opposition to Iran's policies in the Gulf region and its condemnation of the Houthi attacks on Saudi Arabia and the UAE, Cairo does not share Saudi Arabia and the UAE's position regarding Iran. Accordingly, Egypt does not seem eager to engage in an Israeli-Arab military alliance against Iran. It seems that several factors contributed to pushing Egypt to participate in the Negev meeting, foremost of which is the pressure it was subjected to from the UAE and the United States and its quest for financial aid from the Arab Gulf states and the United States to face the financial crisis it is facing as a result of the high prices of oil and basic foodstuffs. Egypt is also seeking to obtain support from the UAE and Israel to put pressure on Ethiopia to respond to Egyptian proposals on the Renaissance Dam.

Conclusion

Israel did not reach its main goal from the Negev meeting, which is to expand its alliance with the Emirates and Bahrain (and Morocco, in part) to include Egypt as well, as a result of Egypt's reservations. Despite this, merely holding the meeting represented a great political and diplomatic achievement for Israel, especially since it was held in the Sde Boker Kibbutz once home to David Ben-Gurion, who, as the first prime minister of Israel and founder of the Israeli army, is considered the most responsible party for the Nakba. But it seems clear that in parallel with the efforts led by Israel to divert the conflict in the region through normalization and alliance building with some Arab governments the Palestinian insistence on resisting Israeli attempts to delegitimize the Palestinian cause is increasing. Given the continued frustration of attempts to find a just political solution to the Palestinian issue, this may lead to a new comprehensive intifada that upturns all calculations.