

# Israel and the UAE on Iran: Shared Foe, Different Perspectives

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### Brief Analysis

Given past developments, the UAE's and Israel's recent announcement of normalization in exchange for shelving annexation plans should come as no great surprise, even if the timing was unexpected. There remains, however, frequently understated differences between one aspect of this relationship often assumed to be a common denominator: Jerusalem's and Abu Dhabi's perspectives on Iran. Understanding and accommodating these differences will be critical issue for a lasting relationship between the two countries, with the Israeli government in particular needing to acknowledge the differences as well as similarities between the two sides.

It is no secret that Israel and the UAE see Iran as a common enemy; both countries have worked together covertly for years to prevent Iranian hegemony in the Gulf and Middle East at large. Since the beginning of their unofficial relationship several decades ago, the two countries have improved their intelligence-sharing and military relations, strengthened their diplomatic ties behind the scenes, and worked to improve their readiness for Iranian threats across the board. President Trump's recent decisions to withdraw troops from parts of the Middle East region and the world at large have further catalyzed development of Israel-UAE relations in anticipation of weakened direct support from the United States.

Nonetheless, the UAE and Israel have fundamentally different relationships with Iran. These differences stem in part from the regional positions of these two countries. Iran and the UAE see each other as rivals jockeying for power in the region. Their differences stem from opposing views on several regional issues and a number of territorial disputes. In contrast, Israel sees the Iranian regime as the "ultimate evil" and an imminent existential threat. Israel refuses to have any interaction with Tehran, and Iran is the only state in the world whose nationals Mossad operatives can only contact for political reasons after receiving express permission from the Prime Minister, while the IDF works extensively to combat Iranian expansion and proxies in Syria.

However, the two countries also have different attitudes in their confidence in being able to handle a military confrontation with Iran. In contrast to Israel, the UAE lacks effective military power and defense capabilities, especially power projection. In addition, the UAE isn't entirely confident in American aid or defense in the case of a military confrontation with Iran. This point is especially salient following the recent attack on Aramco facilities in

Saudi Arabia. The UAE seemed surprised by the lack of meaningful support and actions from Trump, and the experiences raised a question of U.S. reliability in times of conflict. In contrast, **Israel remains confident in American military support.** **Q**

The UAE's situation is further complicated by its geographic location; the country lies adjacent to Iran and is home to a sizable Iranian community. Far from preparing for a confrontation, many Emiratis are concerned about the impacts of a military conflict between Saudi Arabia and Iran, including the potential of a refugee crisis of Saudis flooding the UAE.

Ultimately, both countries see Iran as a threat, albeit to different degrees, but choose different pathways to limiting that threat. Israel has chosen a confrontational approach: threatening the use of force and promoting intense political and economic pressure and sanctions on Iran to prevent its expansion and nuclear program. On the other hand, the UAE backs diplomatic measures to limit Iranian aggression and expansion but is concerned about the continuation of the maximum pressure campaign as it may lead to direct conflict, a scenario that the UAE is actively working to avoid.

Understanding the nature of the small direct overlap between Israeli and Emirati strategic attitudes towards Iran shows that the existence of a mutual enemy is likely not enough to ensure a strategic alliance. In the case of a military confrontation between Israel and Iran, Emirati support should not be taken as a given, even with the new formation of ties. Moreover, if support is offered, it may not be as expansive as some inside Israel currently expect.

This is particularly the case if Israel expects to work towards the use of UAE airspace or bases in a direct attack on Iran. But there may also be hesitation from UAE diplomats to stand side by side with Israelis in initiatives to increase pressure on Iran, which Israel sees as necessary to prevent direct escalation. Given these differences, Israel must actively work to find common ground with the UAE rather than assume cooperation as a given.

The recent issue of the potential of F-35 sales to the UAE highlights the ways in which mismatched expectations can threaten to limit mutually beneficial efforts. Many in the Israeli public and defense establishment have come out against the sale of the F-35—understood by the UAE as part and parcel of the UAE-Israel peace deal—in light of the sale's weakening of Israel's qualitative military edge (QME), a longstanding American policy also enshrined in U.S. law.

But the question of whether to accept or clamor against what is likely to be a long period of negotiations on the F-35 should be reexamined by Israelis, especially as a stronger UAE would strengthen both countries regarding Iran. Aside from its role in the peace deal, Israelis should consider the benefits to a stronger UAE military along with its drawbacks. The deal would bolster the UAE's air force against Iran and allow the UAE to more easily attack Iranian targets. The jets would also increase the UAE's strategic air range to almost the entirety of the Middle East, ostensibly to deter Turkey, as the UAE's participation in a Greek joint air force drill this week exemplified. Moreover, Israel's alleged flip-flopping over the sales has increased tension just weeks after the peace deal was announced. The UAE has responded by cancelling a trilateral meeting with the US and Israel to make a statement regarding Israeli recalcitrance on the topic.

The Israeli government should take this lesson to heart as it approaches building a strategy of deterring Iran that involves the UAE. Working together with regional partners is increasingly vital given a possible sea change in American foreign policy following the upcoming presidential election. A joint policy can and should be adapted to the potential direction of each administration: it should take into account possible escalation if President Trump is reelected, or a possible return to negotiations and eventually the JCPOA if Biden defeats Trump.

During this discussion between the two countries, Israel must search for common red lines to any future discussion with Iran on a new JCPOA. A joint presentation from Israel and the UAE to the next administration in Washington,

bolstered by an agreement on the steps needed to be taken if Iran will cross the mutual red lines regarding its nuclear program, would likely go far in influencing either potential U.S. administration for the mutual benefit of Israel and the UAE.

And Israel has much to offer the UAE in terms of countering Iranian influence and expansion. These include a range of soft power capabilities such as joint diplomatic efforts, technological and economic cooperation, and even increased access to the Mediterranean, which would allow bypassing the danger of an Iranian closure of the straits of Hormuz, and enhanced intelligence sharing. Hard power options include the potential of carrying out joint offensive cyberattacks, potential collaboration on attacking Iranian nuclear or critical infrastructure sites, as well as military cooperation for limited engagement with Iranian proxy forces in Iraq, Yemen or Syria.

The recent tensions over the potential of F-35 sales demonstrate the fragility of the UAE-Israel agreement, especially if common ground on key issues such as Iran cannot be reached. And while the issue of Iran seems a safe place to start, the differences in viewpoints must also be factored into negotiations between the two states, with the understanding that the UAE has its own methods of dealing with Iran. Israel has a major opportunity at present; but if a shared baseline foreign policy isn't developed that takes each sides' interests into account, both run the risk of being less prepared than they could have been for an Iranian move. ❖

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