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The UAE-Israel Peace Agreement: An Opportunity for Peace in the Region?

by [Mohammed Dajani](#)

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Mohammed Dajani](#)

Mohammed S. Dajani Daoudi is the former Weston Fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy and is Director of the Wasatia Academic Institute in Jerusalem.



Brief Analysis

The announcement of a peace deal between the United Arab Emirates and Israel has earned praise from several governments as a step towards peace. Nonetheless, the "Abraham Accords," as the deal is known, can only lead to greater reconciliation if the relevant actors take appropriate steps. So far, the reaction by Palestinian leadership indicates a move backward, away from regional understanding and progress. Nevertheless, there are new opportunities for progress towards a Palestinian state, if only the entities involved would take them.

Historically, Palestinian elements have relied on Arab backing in their struggle for freedom and independence. Nonetheless, Palestinian leadership reacted negatively to the deal, straining its relationship with the UAE and failing to capitalize on an opportunity for future leverage in negotiations with Israel. PA President Mahmoud Abbas publicly denounced the deal, calling it a "betrayal of Jerusalem, Al-Aqsa, and the Palestinian cause." A PA statement affirmed: "Neither the Emirates nor any other party has the right to speak on behalf of the Palestinian people. The Palestinian leadership shall allow nobody to interfere in Palestinian affairs or decide on their behalf regarding their legitimate rights in their homeland."

The Palestinian leadership has since called upon the UAE to immediately backtrack on this "despicable" agreement with Israel and warned other Arab states against submitting to American pressure by following the Emirati decision—no other Arab governments have followed suit. Less surprising, Hamas—Iran's ally in control of the Gaza Strip—expressed its opposition to the deal, claiming the agreement encourages the Israeli occupation of Palestinian territories and the persistence in denying the rights of the Palestinian people.

Furthering their hasty reaction, the Palestinian Authority followed its declarations by recalling its ambassador to the United Arab Emirates in protest over the agreement and called for an urgent meeting of the Arab League to express

its rejection of the deal.

Despite the harsh reaction, the PA might have seen this move coming. It was not surprising that Israel and the UAE would finally agree to normalize relations—cooperation between the two states in different fields has gone on for several years. In October 2018, Israeli athletes competed in judo competitions in the UAE, and the Israeli national anthem was played and the Israeli flag displayed publicly in the country for the first time. In May 2020, an Emirati commercial aircraft landed at Tel Aviv Ben Gurion airport carrying medical aid for the Palestinian Authority to curb the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic (the PA ill-advisedly rejected the aid).

Moreover, relations between the UAE and the PA have been rocky for some time, especially during the past few years as the Gulf state has continued to host opposition Fatah leader Mohammad Dahlan. Dahlan, who continues to serve as a special advisor to the Emirati crown prince, is a personal rival to the PA President Mahmoud Abbas and has been working to replace him as leader of the PA. One could easily interpret the inflated PA reaction to the deal as a result of the personal enmity between Dahlan and Abbas.

The result has been a largely slanted reaction from Palestinian authorities and other civilians. Even among more moderate Palestinian politicians, no one dared to openly declare support for the agreement. On social networks, Palestinians feared to openly express their views in support of the deal lest they be labeled ‘collaborators’, ‘traitors’, or ‘defeatists’. Consequently, only those Palestinians who condemned the normalization agreement took to social media to voice their denunciation of the deal; some using pejorative terms to describe UAE leadership. At al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem, the photo of Mohammed bin Zayed Al-Nahyan was crossed out and demonstrators stepped on an Emirati flag.

And the deal does have flaws. The agreement—the product of lengthy negotiations sponsored by the United States—covers various areas including energy, tourism, investment, security, telecommunications, health care, and technology. It calls for the pursuit of full diplomatic and economic ties, including direct flights, the establishment of embassies with ambassadors. The two countries also agreed to partner on fighting the coronavirus pandemic.

However, education and peace education are not among the areas mentioned. Though the governments of the Gulf states share no borders with Israel and have never confronted Israel militarily, the full normalization of non-governmental popular relations between the countries remains a major challenge. Many Arabs harbor deep-rooted anti-Semitic, anti-Israeli, and anti-Zionist views. Denial of the Holocaust is still common in popular opinion in Arab countries.

But regardless of the issues in the deal, the Palestinian reaction seems largely out of step with the current political situation. It is unclear exactly why a UAE-Israel reconciliation deal would constitute a betrayal of Jerusalem, Al-Aqsa, and the Palestinian cause. Furthermore, a normalization agreement with Israel is not a license for the UAE to speak on behalf of the Palestinian people, interfere in Palestinian affairs, or act on their behalf regarding their legitimate rights in their homeland. Finally, the PA’s call for a meeting of the Arab League is unfounded; normalization of relations between two states remains the sovereign right of those states, a matter in which the Arab League and other Islamic organizations cannot interfere.

Moreover, PA officials’ argument that the agreement violated resolutions of the Arab summits and the 2002 Arab Peace Initiative (the resolutions stipulated that Arab countries would establish normal relations with Israel only “in the context of a comprehensive peace and a full Israeli withdrawal from all the territories occupied since 1967”) fell on deaf ears. The entire affair is a far cry from when Egyptian president Anwar Sadat took the bold step of making a peace deal with Israel and subsequently became a pariah in the Arab world.

For many observers and officials worldwide, the normalization agreement was viewed as a bold step forward **towards fostering reconciliation and co-existence**, boosting the UAE's image as a beacon of tolerance and

moderation. The UAE has already been planning the construction the Abrahamic Family House in Abu Dhabi, which will house a mosque, a church, and a synagogue. Moreover, it has expressed hopes that its actions would help facilitate a peace agreement establishing an independent Palestinian state.

What's more, the UAE-Israel deal did improve future chances for negotiations with Israel by providing the Jewish state with an excuse to forestall its controversial plans to annex large portions of the occupied West Bank. Just as important, the agreement represents a fresh approach to Arab-Israeli relations. The failed Arab Peace Initiative called for collective normalization with Israel once a peace agreement could be reached whereas the present deal offers a different model of individual normalization amid conflict. When the Saudis led the 2002 Arab Peace Initiative, offering normalization of relations between Arab states and Israel in exchange for a two-state resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, these efforts failed to attract Israeli engagement. The UAE-Israel deal implemented a new approach in which an individual state normalizes relations with Israel, and Israel has responded, even if further negotiations still require much work. In all, the deal represents the potential for a new type of "roadmap" for resolving the conflict, using government-to-government normalization as a path to people-to-people normalization.

Now, it falls on the relevant actors to make use of this new approach. The deal will positively affect the prospects of Israeli-Palestinian peace negotiations only if the entities concerned allow. This agreement appeared without direct progress on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict or consultation with Palestinian officials, but the Palestinian leadership's policies have played a part in isolating itself from sitting at the table with the UAE, the United States, and Israel. The impulsive PA reaction has further isolated the Palestinians from powerful regional allies like the Gulf states and Saudi Arabia.

The PA's traditional approach—a reliance on Arab governments' unwillingness to engage Israel until Palestinian statehood is achieved—has now failed as a point of leverage. The UAE has demonstrated that normalization will not necessarily be conditioned on significant Israeli steps toward enabling the creation of a Palestinian state. If the PA hopes to capitalize on this deal for the sake of the Palestinian national project, it must engage rather than reject the regional realities surrounding it. ❖



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THE
WASHINGTON INSTITUTE
for Near East Policy

1111 19th Street NW - Suite 500
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