

How Gulf Arab “Exasperation” with Endless Conflict Led to UAE-Israel Normalization

by [Yoel Guzansky \(/experts/yoel-guzansky\)](/experts/yoel-guzansky), [Yohanan Tzoreff \(/experts/yohanan-tzoreff\)](/experts/yohanan-tzoreff)

Aug 20, 2020

Also available in

[العربية \(/ar/policy-analysis/kyf-daqt-dwl-alkhlyj-dhrana-balsra-alasrayyly-alfstyny-aldhy-la-ynthy\)](/ar/policy-analysis/kyf-daqt-dwl-alkhlyj-dhrana-balsra-alasrayyly-alfstyny-aldhy-la-ynthy)

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

[Yoel Guzansky \(/experts/yoel-guzansky\)](/experts/yoel-guzansky)

Dr. Yoel Guzansky is a Senior Research Fellow at the Institute for National Security Studies (INSS), Tel Aviv University. Guzansky is a contributor to Fikra Forum.

[Yohanan Tzoreff \(/experts/yohanan-tzoreff\)](/experts/yohanan-tzoreff)

Yohanan Tzoreff is a Senior Researcher at the Institute for National Security Studies and a contributor to Fikra Forum.



Brief Analysis

Individuals and groups in the Gulf Arab countries—especially Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Bahrain—have repeatedly expressed interest in Israel and frustration with Palestinian leadership over the last few years. These statements reflect a growing loss of patience with the prolonged Palestinian-Israeli dispute, along with a new attribution of the conflict’s stagnations to the Palestinian side as well as the Israeli one. Indeed, there is a growing frustration among Saudi and Emirati leaders in particular with what they define as Palestinian “unresponsiveness” to their calls for greater flexibility in the negotiations with Israel since the original Oslo Accords of 1993. The new normalization deal between the UAE and Israel starkly reflects these shifts in attitudes. Now, observers have looked to see if other countries in the Gulf will follow suit, and they need to understand the Gulf States are not monolithic group, and every state will make its own calculus and decide in what conditions and at what pace it will be willing to warm up to the Jewish state.

A new narrative within certain Gulf states on the conflict was typified earlier this year by dialogue from the comedic television series “Makhraj 7,” a Ramadan feature this year on the popular Saudi MBC network. ‘Makhraj 7’ was one of [several widely-aired Saudi Ramadan programs](#)

[\(https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/02/world/middleeast/saudi-arabia-um-haroun-jews.html\)](https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/02/world/middleeast/saudi-arabia-um-haroun-jews.html) this year dealing with, among other thing, the question of Arab “normalization” of relations with Israel, and it was this subject that understandably gained a great deal of attention.

‘Makhraj 7’ included one scene where a character states: “The real enemy, more so than the Israelis, is the one who does not appreciate your standing by his side, and instead curses you night and day. We fought wars for Palestine, we embargoed our oil for the sake of Palestine, we pay the salaries and expenses of the Palestinian Authority when we ourselves now need that money... And yet in the end, they look for every opportunity to attack Saudi Arabia.” Israel has certainly taken note of this type of public message, but it is important to understand the reason behind this frustration, and what Saudi Arabia and the UAE are looking for and expecting when it comes to relations with Israel.

The ‘Makhraj 7’ segment reflects a perspective in the ongoing debate between some Gulfis—mainly Saudi and Emirati—and Palestinians about normalization with Israel. This debate had recently intensified, first against the background of the **Trump peace plan (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/Israel-Israeli-Palestine-map-Trump-plan-vision-leak>)** and subsequently in light of the unilateral steps towards annexation publicly contemplated by Israel. The show accurately represents more than a few voices who had lately accused the Palestinians of what they term “ingratitude” in the face of the large amounts of financial and political support Gulf states have extended to Palestinians over the span of the conflict.

This public expression reflects a ‘trickle down’ of frustration initially visible among governing elites, now adopted by influencers under their direction. The ‘cover’ for this was provided when Saudi Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman met with Jewish community leaders in the United States in 2018 and was quoted as charging the Palestinian leadership with “never missing an opportunity to miss an opportunity” to make peace with Israel. MbS had also previously hosted Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas in November 2017 in anticipation of the release of the Trump peace plan. There, he exerted decidedly undiplomatic pressure on Abbas—reportedly including explicit threats—to accept it, though the crown prince’s efforts proved unsuccessful.

Moreover, while Gulf states commonly commit on some level to the Palestinian cause, often through significant financial aid, the differing interests of these states drive their aid operations in different directions. The internal Palestinian split between Hamas in Gaza and the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank has created differences of opinion within the Gulf as well. ()

Notwithstanding their traditional tendency to show solidarity with Palestinian national aspirations and respond to voices rising from the Arab street, the GCC states—with the notable exception of Qatar—generally display a hostile attitude toward Hamas. This is because Hamas defines itself as part of the Muslim Brotherhood movement, anathema to Saudi Arabia and the UAE. Hamas’s ties to Iran only intensify apprehensions about Hamas and further undermine the writ of the Palestinian Authority.

The UAE’s schism with the Palestinian Authority has perhaps been the most stark, visible even before the announced normalization deal and Mahmoud Abbas’s removal of Palestinian envoy to the UAE. For years, the UAE has been grooming Muhammad Dahlan, a rival to PA President Abbas who heads what he calls the “reformist movement” inside Fatah. Support for Dahlan tacitly demonstrates the UAE’s dissatisfaction both with Qatar filling the gap Saudi Arabia left behind and Abbas’s policies—particularly his unwillingness to prepare the Palestinian arena for “the day after” his own passing from the scene. In so doing, however, the UAE has forfeited much of its influence in the Palestinian arena, supporting Dahlan as a competitor to both Fatah in the West Bank and Hamas in Gaza.

Saudi Arabia’s (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/saudi-poll-public-foreign-policy-sunn-shia-2020>) posture toward the Muslim Brotherhood and Hamas, once relatively pragmatic, has particularly soured under MbS. Since his arrival on the Saudi political scene, the kingdom has outlawed the Muslim Brotherhood and arrested scores of Hamas operatives on Saudi soil in 2019, facing judgment as “members and financiers of a terrorist organization.” Qatar, with its great wealth and close connections to regional Islamist movements, has stepped into this vacuum. For years, Qatar has financed the day-to-day subsistence of Gazans, strengthening their dependence on this support and probably Israel’s as well, which depends on this cashflow as a temporary means of calming the situation in Gaza. With the PA also struggling financially, Qatar has lately drawn itself closer to the PA in an attempt to become a bridge between Israelis and Palestinians.

Combined with this frustration with Palestinian leadership independent of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is a strong interest in the Gulf in opening up new markets, expanding their influence, and enjoying wider legitimacy by leveraging their vast wealth. For Saudi Arabia and the UAE, Israel is seen as a means to increase this international

influence.

The Oslo Accords had once aroused great hopes in certain Gulf Arab countries as the moment to make these connections a reality. Those countries hurried to allow the opening of official Israeli legations and sign commercial agreements with Israeli companies. Though the Oslo process stalled, it combined with the perceived threats from Iran in more recent years to enhance the perception of Israel in certain parts of the Gulf, especially given the view that Israel is America's "special" ally. For these states, the pressing concern is Iran, and an end to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict will allow the region to focus on this other territorial threat. Tangible signs of normalization have become visible in Bahrain, and the UAE's announcement has been the most overt but by no means only move towards explicit relations with Israel.

These twin dynamics: frustration with Palestinian leadership and interest in Israel's potential, help explain the notably positive Saudi and Emirati response to the announcement of the Trump peace plan in January 2020. Both governments voiced support for the principle of the plan even while expressing reservations about its specific content. It was their strategic imperative to display a sympathetic attitude toward the Trump Administration and simultaneously attach great importance to resuming peace talks between the Palestinians and Israel. This dualistic approach reflected the intricacy of Gulf Arab interests, as well as an apparent interest demonstrated in particular by the KSA and the UAE in pushing both sides back to the negotiating table.

However, in determining whether other states will follow on the heels of the UAE's announcement, messages are complicated by the states' sensitivity to popular Arab and Islamic criticism about any deviation from full support for the Palestinian cause. The tight coordination between the Trump Administration, the Saudis, and the Emiratis was already the object of deep Palestinian suspicion and concern, especially after the feeble Saudi and Emirati protests against relocation of the U.S. embassy in Israel to Jerusalem. The predominant Arab opposition to the Trump plan once it was announced, led by Abbas's categorical rejection, effectively silenced the plan's Gulfi supporters after their initial cautious statements.

This dynamic highlights an important reality of the conflict: Palestinian leadership—regardless of the diminishing importance of their cause on the international and inter-Arab agendas—retain the key to legitimizing the normalization with Israel desired a number of the Gulf Arab states. Palestinian leadership therefore see any step toward that normalization as a form of treason and an assault on the Palestinian narrative. It weakens the Palestinian position and strengthens the imbalance of power that is already in Israel's favor.

As such, other states are likely to continue to look for a political solution to the conflict before following in the UAE's footsteps. Saudi Arabia, for example, continues to back the Palestinians' positions on core issues, though they expect them to demonstrate greater flexibility at the negotiating table. At the same time, these Gulf states have made vehement declaratory objections to Israel's planned annexationist moves in the Jordan Valley and the West Bank. They have rejected them as unilateral, and contrary both to Palestinian demands and international law. Foreign ministries in both Riyadh and Abu Dhabi have also emphasized their continued support for the establishment of a Palestinian state alongside Israel with East Jerusalem as its capital.

The Palestinians are now facing a great challenge. They have to find ways to prevent further erosion in the Arab world stance vis-à-vis the Palestinian issue, and, critically, convince other Arab leaders, especially among the Gulf monarchies, not to follow UAE's steps of normalization with Israel. ❖



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Iran Takes Next Steps on Rocket Technology](#)

Feb 11, 2022



Farzin Nadimi

[\(/policy-analysis/iran-takes-next-steps-rocket-technology\)](#)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

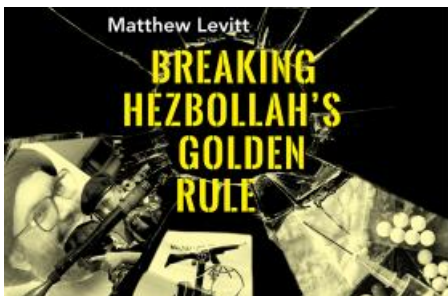
[Saudi Arabia Adjusts Its History, Diminishing the Role of Wahhabism](#)

Feb 11, 2022



Simon Henderson

[\(/policy-analysis/saudi-arabia-adjusts-its-history-diminishing-role-wahhabism\)](#)



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

[Podcast: Breaking Hezbollah's Golden Rule](#)

Feb 9, 2022



Matthew Levitt

[\(/policy-analysis/podcast-breaking-hezbollahs-golden-rule\)](#)