

Why the Israel-UAE Agreement Is Actually a Very Big Deal

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It shows the Palestinians that their longstanding paradigm for isolating Israel has failed, partly due to converging regional interests, and partly because it was based on incorrect assumptions.

Palestinians have called the normalization of ties between the UAE and Israel announced by President Trump on Thursday a “betrayal.” The Palestinian Authority immediately withdrew its ambassador from Abu Dhabi. Palestinians are wedded to the paradigm that has been a guiding principle for decades, leading them to see any agreement between any Arab state and Israel as coming at their expense.

In the past, they have insisted that they maintain a veto on progress of ties between Arab states and Israel. Either Israel accepted a deal on Palestinian terms, or Israel would remain in regional isolation. The Arab Peace Initiative adopted by the Arab League in 2003 reinforced this view that the Palestinians long favored. Peace between Israel and the Arab states comes only at the end.

This old thinking was based on the idea that the Middle East is a static place without converging interests between the Arab states and Israel. At best, peace between Israel and the Arab states would be a consolation prize in return for Israel meeting all Palestinian demands, which have not modified in many years. Today, this approach has become utterly unrealistic.

This is because in the real world, countries have converging mutual interests, and third parties will find it difficult to thwart interests that bilateral parties want to pursue. In the case of Israel and Arab states, there were different moments over the last decade that accentuated those common ties.

Indeed, the old paradigm has actually not been effective for decades. It did not stop two Arab countries on Israel’s borders—Egypt (1979) and Jordan (1994)—from making peace. One can say these countries have their own equities given the fact they shed blood on the battlefield with Israel. Now, Israel is making peace with an Arab country not on its borders that cannot make the same claim.

Indeed, much has changed in the Mideast since the API passed in 2003. Among the changes: the emergence of Iran as a potential nuclear power with its support of proxy forces that challenge Sunni governments was key. So was the emergence of ISIS and the belief that Israel could offer intelligence assets in dealing with the threat. Not to be ignored is the success of Israeli high-tech and a belief the Gulf states look to Israel to help them digitize their economies and reduce their dependence on oil in the face of the rise of alternative energy sources. Israel also quietly established some nascent security and economic ties with all of the Gulf states. The move last week takes what was in the shadows and brings it into the public. It is time for the Palestinians to let go and finally bury a failed paradigm. The Palestinian paradigm failed not just due to a convergence of regional interests among the parties. It failed because it carried certain implicit assumptions that were incorrect.

First, it assumed if you demonize Israel in the region and impose regional isolation, it will force Israel's hand. The Palestinians have felt demonized by the Trump administration, rightly or wrongly, but it has not forced them to accept a peace deal it feels is not in their interest.

Why should Israel be different? Demonization does not work.

The opposite is the case. The quiet, positive relationships Israeli and Emirati officials built over time were an important component in this peace accord.

Another implied assumption was that an Israeli-Palestinian peace deal could only work if it was married to regional opening as a consequence. In fact, the deal has to be attractive enough to Israelis and Palestinians alike that it is worth doing in its own right.

Having said all this, the Palestinian assumption is too dour. Their belief that their cause is now buried in light of the UAE-Israel announcement is wrong. When Egypt and Jordan made peace with Israel, their tendency was to be more engaged in Israeli-Palestinian peacemaking than before.

Why? They were each politically exposed for making the move with Israel, leading them to want to widen the circle of peace. For example, Yasser Arafat never visited an Arab country without consulting with Cairo first. Egypt's President Hosni Mubarak hosted many peace summits between Israel and the Palestinians. Jordan's King Hussein went to the Wye River peace conference straight from the Mayo Clinic in October 1998 shortly before he died, in an effort to coax Israelis and Palestinians to make concessions, which they did.

Once the shock subsides, the peace deal between the UAE and Israel should be used to revive ties between the Emiratis and Palestinians. The frostiness between Abu Dhabi and Ramallah is not because of the peace announcement, but predates it. There is personal enmity between Emirati Crown Prince Mohamed bin Zayed and Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas, since the former invited the latter's bitter rival Mohammad Dahlan to live in the UAE.

The Palestinians should also realize that, thanks to the Emiratis, this peace deal takes Israeli annexation off the table for now, and thereby preserves the option of a two-state solution. Senior Arab officials say the UAE did not move forward on peace with Israel without securing a commitment from the Trump White House not to recognize annexation in a second term, and Joe Biden is on record as being against annexation. Neither Israel nor the U.S. is going to want to jeopardize this peace with annexation.

It is time for the Palestinians to get over their shock and begin to see the Israeli-Emirati breakthrough as a potential bridge to restart talks with Israel; after all, Netanyahu and Abbas have not publicly met since 2010. The Emirates' close ties with Israel can be helpful. The old paradigm is dead. It needs to be replaced with an approach by the Palestinians that turns a crisis into an opportunity.

David Makovsky is the Ziegler Distinguished Fellow at The Washington Institute, creator of the podcast [Decision](#)

<https://shows.acast.com/decision-points/>), and coauthor with Dennis Ross of the book [Be Strong and of Good Courage: How Israel's Most Important Leaders Shaped Its Destiny](#) (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/be-strong-and-of-good-courage-how-israels-most-important-leaders-shaped-its>). This article was originally published *on the New York Daily News website* (<https://www.nydailynews.com/opinion/ny-oped-why-the-israel-uae-agreement-is-actually-a-very-big-deal-20200818-2czev5piercynkvsjsflulabpa-story.html>). ❖

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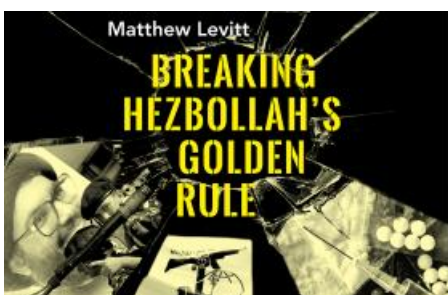
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