

# The Normalization Deal Splits the Gulf States—for Now

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Brief Analysis

**Some Gulf governments have welcomed the paradigm-changing Israel-UAE agreement while others have not, and those who follow Abu Dhabi's path will do so based on their own interests and timetables.**

When President Trump launched his Israeli-Palestinian peace plan in January, representatives from three Gulf states attended the unveiling event: Bahrain, Oman, and the United Arab Emirates. Their attendance suggested at least implicit endorsement of the plan, and was all the more notable given the [absence of Egypt and Jordan](#) (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/trump-peace-plan-attracts-some-gulf-states-but-not-consensus-backing>), the only two countries who held peace treaties with Israel at the time. Last week, the UAE upped the ante by agreeing to a roadmap for normalization with Israel, creating a stir across the region and putting several Gulf states in a delicate position.

## UAE PRIORITIZES ITS INTERESTS

In prior decades, normalization was held up as a carrot to Israel if it made peace with the Palestinians; isolation was the corresponding stick. Anticipating that the new normalization deal would garner intense criticism from pro-Palestinian camps, the UAE claims that it made the decision in support of the Palestinian cause—specifically, by getting Israel to agree that it will [freeze its West Bank annexation plans](#) (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/lessons-of-the-uae-breakthrough-how-we-got-here-and-why-the-u.s.-role-remains>). Minister of State Anwar Gargash noted that the deal would “preserve the chances of a two-state solution,” while Foreign Minister Abdullah bin Zayed described the annexation freeze as a “huge breakthrough in Arab-Israeli relations.” Such statements align with the longstanding Emirati claim that annexation is a redline.

Yet many of those who agree that annexation is a redline also consider normalization a redline. Therefore, few believe that the UAE's reasoning was primarily driven by the threat of annexation. A Palestinian Authority spokesman even accused Abu Dhabi of “conducting normalization in the guise of supporting the Palestinian cause.” Whatever the degree of the UAE's sympathies, the government has [prioritized its strategic interest](#) (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/putting-the-uae-israel-agreement-in-its-proper-perspective>) in advancing relations with Israel over maintaining appearances vis-a-vis the Palestinian issue. According to the older generation of Gulf leaders—currently represented by King Salman of Saudi Arabia and Emir Sabah of Kuwait, and previously by Sheikh Zayed of the UAE until his death in 2004—isolating Israel in defense of the Palestinians should trump any benefit that may accrue from aligning with Israel. Yet Emirati crown prince and de facto ruler Muhammad bin Zayed (MbZ) has shown repeatedly that he is willing to throw out the maps drawn by the old guard and carve a new path.

In his eyes, a deeper relationship with Israel is beneficial because the two small states share much in common, from their interest in

security and technology to their similar perceptions of regional threats. Both are aligned in the fight against Islamist terrorism, and both agree on the threat posed by Iran. Normalization could allow them to form a more cohesive regional bloc on Iran policy—an option that might have helped them oppose the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action more robustly. (Notably, Joe Biden will have to contend with this nascent opposition bloc if he wins office and decides to bring the United States back into compliance with the Iran nuclear deal.) Normalization may also bring economic benefits for the UAE, which have long been an attractor given the country's persistent economic difficulties but are especially crucial now that the coronavirus pandemic has severely affected it.

Another sweetener may have been the promise of military upgrades. As Ambassador Dennis Ross [noted in the \*Washington Post\*](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-israel-uae-agreement-is-a-key-step-for-peace-and-sends-a-crucial-message) (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-israel-uae-agreement-is-a-key-step-for-peace-and-sends-a-crucial-message>), “Formal peace would give [the UAE] access to previously off-limits U.S. weaponry, such as advanced drones. Until now, these weapons had been denied to them because of the U.S. commitment to preserving Israel’s qualitative military edge.” This would fit squarely with MBZ’s desire to build such capabilities—though it will also catch the eye of Congress, segments of which have opposed certain Trump administration weapons sales to the Gulf states. It may also create a stir in Israel, which has longstanding objections to the sale of F-35 fighter jets to the UAE.

## REGIONAL REACTIONS: SILENCE AND SUPPORT

The Gulf response to the deal has been mixed so far. Among Emiratis, anecdotal evidence suggests most will get in line behind the policy. The younger generation [is less resolute about the Palestinian issue](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/israel-uae-deal-achieves-a-middle-east-rarity-its-win-win-win-palestinians) (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/israel-uae-deal-achieves-a-middle-east-rarity-its-win-win-win-palestinians>), and even older commentators who opposed normalization in resurfaced tweets are already whistling a new tune. In any case, all UAE residents—including Palestinians—are limited in what criticism they can level publicly.

The quickest regional response was a supportive statement from Bahrain, which called the announcement a historic step. This was not a surprise—in addition to joining the U.S. peace plan rollout ceremony in January, Bahrain hosted a summer 2019 economic summit attended by Israeli officials. Manama’s view is informed by its fear of Iranian efforts to provide lethal aid to militant elements of the Bahraini Shia opposition.

Oman issued a statement of support for the deal as well. Muscat has long endorsed better ties with Israel, as demonstrated by its hosting of Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu in 2018. Yet it also [maintains friendly ties with Iran](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/netanyahu-visits-oman) (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/netanyahu-visits-oman>) as part of its policy of neutrality.

Kuwait, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia were officially silent on the announcement. Notwithstanding Kuwait’s expulsion of Palestinians for supporting Saddam Hussein’s 1990 invasion, Emir Sabah has vigorously defended their cause throughout his six decades in public life. As foreign minister, he championed the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), a collective of developing states who regularly criticize the Israeli occupation and characterize it as the core issue for Palestinians. To this day, Kuwaiti representatives at NAM meetings often make scathing comments about perceived Israeli indifference to Palestinian suffering.

The UAE deal also puts Qatar in a difficult position—in part because it prefers to hedge its ties with Israel and Hamas, and also because its relations with the UAE remain adversarial. News agencies associated with the Qatari government broadly covered the deal, including virulent opposition to it.

Saudi Arabia may be the most conflicted of all. Past public comments by Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman seemingly indicate that he too may choose normalization with Israel. Yet he is constrained by his father, King Salman, who remains squarely committed to the terms of the 2002 Arab Peace Initiative—namely, “land for peace” and a two-state solution in exchange for Arab normalization. Instead, the crown prince has been obliged to signal Saudi softening toward Israel in [more indirect but still-potent ways](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/a-historic-holocaust-awareness-awakening-in-saudi-arabia-of-all-places) (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/a-historic-holocaust-awareness-awakening-in-saudi-arabia-of-all-places>), such as making gestures of religious tolerance, releasing unprecedented statements on Holocaust awareness, and sending government officials to visit Auschwitz. Riyadh may also worry that fuller normalization would erode its claim to Islamic leadership and custodianship of holy sites in Mecca and Medina, which is increasingly being contested by Iran and Turkey. Indeed, Ankara and Tehran have already criticized the UAE deal on religious grounds, calling normalization a betrayal and a dagger in the back of all Muslims.

Perhaps giving a window into the kingdom’s official thinking, [an op-ed](https://aawsat.com/home/article/2448601/%D8%B9%D8%A8%D8%AF-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B1%D8%AD%D9%85%D9%86-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%B4%D8%AF/%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A5%D9%85%D8%A7%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D9%88%D8%A5%D8%B3%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%A6%D9%8A%D9%84) (<https://aawsat.com/home/article/2448601/%D8%B9%D8%A8%D8%AF-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B1%D8%AD%D9%85%D9%86-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%B4%D8%AF/%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A5%D9%85%D8%A7%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D9%88%D8%A5%D8%B3%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%A6%D9%8A%D9%84>) by a prominent writer in a Saudi newspaper

downplayed the UAE's decision while also criticizing the Palestinian Authority for not achieving progress on Palestinian needs. In his view, every Arab country has the right to manage its own affairs, including Israeli relations, without the input of other countries or the Palestinians.

## WHO'S NEXT?

The roadmap for normalization will become clearer over the next few weeks, but Israel and the UAE are already showing their eagerness to get on with practical steps such as air links and direct phone links. A signing ceremony is expected to take place at the White House in September, along with a series of bilateral meetings between Israeli and Emirati officials. The question is, will other Gulf states join the UAE in accepting normalization now, or will they wait to see the fallout in the region and internationally?

The most likely to jump on the bandwagon in the near term is Bahrain. And if Manama leaps, Oman might feel more comfortable jumping on as well—just as it did when it pledged to send its ambassador to the January event in Washington only after the UAE and Bahrain confirmed. Saudi policy may not change until Crown Prince Muhammad becomes king, and even then, he will have to manage the issue of Riyadh's international religious leadership. Qatar is unlikely to give the UAE a win in the near term. And many Kuwaiti officials want to explicitly tie any potential normalization move to progress on the Palestinian track. Regardless of the exact timetable for other countries, however, the UAE's move has broken a longstanding taboo.

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