

Lessons of the UAE Breakthrough: How We Got Here, and Why the U.S. Role Remains Central

by [David Makovsky \(/experts/david-makovsky\)](#)

Aug 17, 2020

Also available in

[العربية \(/ar/policy-analysis/drws-mn-anjaz-alarat-kyf-wslna-aly-hdhh-almrht-wlmadha-ybqy-dwr-alwlayat-almthdt\)](#)

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[David Makovsky \(/experts/david-makovsky\)](#)

David Makovsky is the Ziegler distinguished fellow at The Washington Institute and director of the Koret Project on Arab-Israel Relations.



Brief Analysis

Statements and actions by Israel and the UAE show how much regional decisionmaking is still shaped by U.S. assurances that enable parties to calibrate their cost-benefit analyses—an approach that could serve as a template for potential future Israel-Gulf ties.

In parsing the significance of the landmark August 13 announcement that Israel and the United Arab Emirates would be normalizing their relations, it is important to understand how U.S.-led diplomacy developed over the course of this year. It is fair to say that none of the participants foresaw this outcome at the start of 2020, and the manner in which they arrived there reveals the diplomatic dynamics between Washington, Israel, and Arab governments.

HOW ANNEXATION BECAME A TICKING CLOCK

When the Trump administration unveiled its [long-awaited Israeli-Palestinian peace plan](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/continuity-vs.-overreach-in-the-trump-peace-plan-part-1-borders-and-jerusal) (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/continuity-vs.-overreach-in-the-trump-peace-plan-part-1-borders-and-jerusal>) on January 28, Palestinians rejected it outright as being unfair to their interests. In response, Israeli prime minister Binyamin Netanyahu—just before his third successive, inconclusive election—declared that the Trump administration should permit Israel to unilaterally annex the approximately 30 percent of the West Bank set aside for Israel in the U.S. plan. The administration insisted that he hold off until after the March election, fearing the appearance of U.S. interference in the vote.

On April 20, Netanyahu and rival Benny Gantz reached a coalition agreement that would allow the prime minister to bring annexation before the cabinet and Knesset for a vote as early as July 1, provided Israel could secure the “full agreement” of the United States and avoid endangering its peace treaties with Egypt and Jordan. This target date

created an international countdown to annexation—and, in turn, a catalyst for direct and indirect foreign pressure that ultimately prevented it.

In the United States, polls showed that Joe Biden was significantly ahead in the presidential race, and he publicly opposed annexation, so Netanyahu feared that there would be repercussions for Israel if he tried to implement the policy too close to the U.S. election. Meanwhile, various U.S. and foreign officials feared that annexation would spell the end of the two-state solution and create regional problems, from European leaders to congressional Democrats (191 of whom signed a petition against the idea) to Jordan's King Abdullah (who publicly warned of a “massive collision” with Israel, echoing the chorus of Arab officials privately sending their concerns to the White House).

In Israel, retired national security officials noted that the move would provide no strategic advantage for their country. Elements of the right wing opposed it as well, albeit for diametrically different reasons—settler leaders did not want Netanyahu to yield 70 percent of the West Bank to a future Palestinian state, as called for under the U.S. plan.

Failing to predict the severity of the backlash against its plan, the Trump administration was displeased with Netanyahu for essentially casting the proposal as an annexation plan rather than a peace plan. Accordingly, **Washington's tone changed (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/did-pompeos-visit-shift-the-annexation-debate-in-israel-and-washington>)** around the time of Secretary of State Mike Pompeo's May 13 visit to Israel. U.S. officials began insisting that Netanyahu reach consensus on the matter with his coalition partners Gantz and Gabi Ashkenazi, seemingly in the hope of shrinking any annexation that did occur and, perhaps, calming the stormy waters. Yet it was far from clear that officials could find a sweet spot assuaging all interested parties—their counterparts in Europe and the Middle East. Nonetheless, senior U.S. officials made clear that the Trump White House would prefer to avoid alienating Netanyahu during a U.S. election year.

The U.S. approach shifted again in late June, when senior presidential advisor Jared Kushner dispatched special assistant Avi Berkowitz to Israel to urge territorial “compensation” as a part of the annexation package. Specifically, the administration insisted that Israel provide the Palestinians with reportedly around 6 percent of Area C (the 60 percent of the West Bank controlled by Israel) in exchange, so the White House could claim that annexation was not unilateral and that each side would gain about the same amount of land. Netanyahu refused, however, likely because his settler base fiercely opposes yielding any of Area C. He may have thought he could still sell Trump directly on the idea that unilateral annexation would energize the American evangelical base during the election campaign. Yet a U.S. official has since indicated that the White House was disappointed because younger evangelicals were apparently not excited about the idea.

BREAKING THE IMPASSE

By the time Berkowitz returned home on July 2, a new approach was required. U.S. officials presented Israel with the idea of forgoing annexation entirely in exchange for a non-belligerency agreement with the UAE. The idea was championed by Emirati ambassador to Washington Yousef Al Otaiba, who had supported a previous non-belligerency proposal in 2019. A few weeks before the latest proposal, he had reached out to Israelis in a *Yediot Aharonot* op-ed, writing that they would have to **choose between normalization and annexation (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/mapping-west-bank-annexation-territorial-and-political-uncertainties>)**. After receiving the U.S.-tendered offer, Israel responded that it needed to be a peace treaty, according to a senior Arab official.

From that moment on, Otaiba's focus became extracting assurances from the United States. According to the same Arab official cited above, Emirati leaders assumed that a Biden administration would not permit unilateral annexation under any circumstances, but they wanted to cover all their bases by asking Trump to promise he would

oppose it if he wins a second term. Among other revelations, this approach reflects the centrality of U.S. policy in Emirati calculations. The administration apparently assented to this request—when reporters asked Kushner about annexation on August 17, he replied, “We do not plan to give our consent for some time.” And since the UAE deal was announced, Netanyahu told the sympathetic *Israel Hayom* newspaper, “[The White House] didn’t let me choose. They said it was their position.”

According to various diplomats, the Trump administration will further sweeten the deal by recommending that Congress exempt the UAE from at least some restrictions on military purchases levied on Middle Eastern countries that are deemed potential threats to Israel. It is still unclear if Israeli officials will reinforce this message when members of Congress ask them about lifting these restrictions.

LESSONS FOR UPCOMING DIPLOMACY

Now that the Israel-UAE deal has been formally announced, the sequencing of next steps is not yet clear. President Trump is likely to push for a U.S. signing ceremony within the next month, in part to help with his reelection campaign. This timeframe may not be long enough for the Emirati and Israeli bureaucracies to iron out all of the details related to a panoply of bilateral issues (e.g., civil aviation, trade, investment, taxation, diplomatic/consular ties). If not, they may envision follow-on agreements dedicated to such matters. Whatever the final timing, several lessons are clear:

U.S. centrality in Arab-Israel peacemaking. The deal once again demonstrates that any Arab-Israel deal is essentially a three-way deal with the United States. Absent U.S. commitments to the UAE, it is difficult to imagine this peace deal occurring with Israel as more of a silent player. Although Israeli officials are keen on reaching peace agreements with other Gulf countries, they will need to assume that the current template—with substantial U.S.-brokered bilateral concessions to Arab states—will remain the same.

Timing is key once again. No party should forget the role that timing plays in such deals, including the course of U.S. decisionmaking. In this case, the Trump administration desperately wanted a Middle East diplomatic achievement during an uphill presidential race. Emirati watchers also note that the UAE sees the agreement as providing political insurance in the event of a Biden administration that might have a less charitable view of the Gulf. The current status of Iran’s nuclear situation and its increasingly threatening posture toward the Gulf states likely influenced the deal as well. Recently, the UN Security Council made its long-predicted decision of refusing to extend the arms embargo against Iran—a factor that Republicans will use as proof of why the Emiratis should be permitted to purchase more-advanced arms from the United States if Congress balks at easing restrictions.

Not much domestic risk for Israel. Netanyahu has long believed in the potential of bringing two of the region’s most technologically focused states together, each with a large GDP and strategic convergence on thwarting Iran’s ambitions. Indeed, he often tells interviewers that his tough stance against Iran has won him points with Gulf states over the years. Perhaps more important, however, he was seemingly able to reach this agreement without incurring much domestic political risk. Polls indicate that peace with the UAE is quite popular inside Israel—as Channel 12 reported this weekend, 77 percent of Israeli respondents prefer the peace deal over annexation, while only 16.5 percent prefer the latter. Netanyahu has also noted that annexation was Washington’s card, not Jerusalem’s, as the *Israel Hayom* quote makes clear.

Other domestic lessons for Israel’s political players bear mentioning as well. Groups across the political spectrum became strange bedfellows in blocking annexation; this opposition came at a key juncture and was amplified by the Trump administration’s pressure for Israeli consensus. Moreover, the settler leadership must now question its apparent overreach. If Netanyahu did not fear his base, he likely could have reached a compromise with the White House and implemented partial annexation before the UAE deal emerged.

David Makovsky is the Ziegler Distinguished Fellow at The Washington Institute, creator of the podcast [Decision Points \(https://shows.acast.com/decision-points/\)](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 \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/be-strong-and-of-good-courage-how-israels-most-important-leaders-shaped-its\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/be-strong-and-of-good-courage-how-israel-s-most-important-leaders-shaped-its-destiny). ❖

RECOMMENDED



BRIEF ANALYSIS

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

Feb 11, 2022

◆
Farzin Nadimi

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



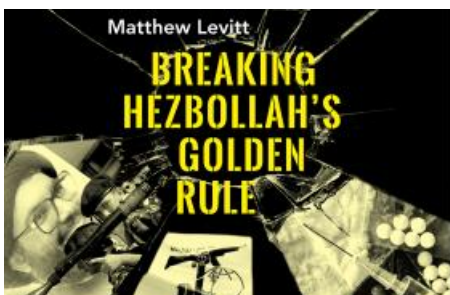
BRIEF ANALYSIS

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

Feb 11, 2022

◆
Simon Henderson

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



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

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

Feb 9, 2022



Matthew Levitt

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

TOPICS

[Arab-Israeli Relations \(/policy-analysis/arab-israeli-relations\)](#)

[Gulf & Energy Policy \(/policy-analysis/gulf-energy-policy\)](#)

[Peace Process \(/policy-analysis/peace-process\)](#)

[U.S. Policy \(/policy-analysis/us-policy\)](#)

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

[Israel \(/policy-analysis/israel\)](#)

[Gulf States \(/policy-analysis/gulf-states\)](#)