

Israel-UAE Deal Achieves a Middle East Rarity: It's Win-Win-Win, Palestinians Included

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Arab countries that have official relations with Israel are more effective at advancing Palestinian interests, and now Abu Dhabi has joined their ranks.

The United States, Israel and the United Arab Emirates pulled off the rarest of feats on Thursday: a diplomatic win-win-win in the Middle East. President Donald Trump announced a historic breakthrough in which the UAE will normalize relations with Israel in exchange for Israel dropping its plan to annex parts of the West Bank that Palestinians claim for a future state. The Palestinian leadership will inevitably denounce the development, but it would be wiser if they didn't: This agreement could benefit them, too.

Until now, Israelis and Palestinians have been locked in a moribund process to trade land for peace after the initial euphoria of the early 1990s that followed the signing of the Oslo agreement between the Palestinians and Israel, and the Wadi Araba peace treaty between Jordan and Israel, gave way to repeated failures. Despair and conflict soon ensued, and the prospects for progress began to quickly fade. With this grim landscape as a backdrop, the announcement of Thursday's deal holds the potential of breathing life into the peace process. (Of course, Oslo also stands as a painful reminder of how opportunities and hopes can be quickly dashed.)

The new agreement is rooted in the national interests of both the UAE and Israel, but its implications go far beyond that. Until now, Israel has enjoyed normal relations—i.e. recognition of its existence and the perks that entails, such as embassies, trade, travel and cooperation on security, water and more—from just two Arab countries, Egypt and Jordan. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, like every Israeli premier before him, has made normalizing relations with Arab and Muslim countries a key piece of his diplomatic agenda. This reflects a deeper, long-standing Israeli desire for a normal place in the region.

For Netanyahu, the agreement is a major diplomatic win. Plus it also gives him a way out of a politically tricky corner

he had painted himself into, strengthening his tenuous hold on power. In the last two Israeli elections, he had promised his supporters on the right that Israel would annex parts of the West Bank—a move that the Palestinians and the overwhelming majority of the international community consider illegitimate. Due to international pressure and concerns within the Israeli security establishment over the security and diplomatic implications, Netanyahu has been unable to advance annexation. Now he can claim a political victory while extracting himself from the annexation bind.

But this is also a diplomatic boost for the UAE. The small Arab Gulf country is known for its fierce American-oriented posture and its willingness to be a trailblazer on a number of controversial issues despite criticism from some of its neighbors. Furthermore, like many Gulf and other Arab states, it views Iranian activities as the main threat to its national security, and is worried about the American trend—exhibited by both the Obama and Trump administrations—of reducing U.S. involvement in the Middle East. These concerns are also shared by Israel, creating a very strong convergence of interests between the two former enemies.

Still, this move will no doubt see the UAE come under severe criticism from its many foes. Its regional opponents will almost certainly portray the move as a betrayal of the Palestinians. The Palestinian Authority's own strategy relies on isolating Israel, and this will be seen as a severe blow to the decades-old approach. Additionally, some countries in the region, such as Syria, consider the very recognition of Israel as a betrayal.

Media in Qatar and Turkey, which the UAE opposes because of their support for the Muslim Brotherhood in contrast to its own policy of separating religion and politics, are already criticizing the UAE's outreach to Israel. Iran will employ similar messaging and try to isolate the UAE within regional groupings such as the Organization of Islamic Cooperation.

Importantly, the UAE's recognition of Israel also tests whether the Palestinian issue still resonates with the Arab street, especially the younger generation. While the UAE is not a democracy by any stretch of the imagination, its leaders, as is true throughout the Arab world, are sensitive to public opinion. Though this move will not be as popular with Emiratis as with Israelis, there are indications that the Palestinian issue is no longer a high priority for the UAE public.

The historic willingness of Arab states to put the plight of the Palestinians in the center of their foreign policy has magnified the clout of the Palestinians and their struggle. But if the UAE can pull off this diplomatic 180, it will suggest that the Palestinian issue is losing its traditional resonance and is now incapable of mobilizing the masses. This could further weaken the Palestinians' diplomatic hand.

The **[Palestinian leadership has understandably \(https://www.timesofisrael.com/a-despicable-betrayal-pa-blasts-emirates-demands-retraction-of-israel-deal/\)](https://www.timesofisrael.com/a-despicable-betrayal-pa-blasts-emirates-demands-retraction-of-israel-deal/)** condemned the move, particularly since they were not party to an agreement that they see as bypassing their interests and undermining their diplomatic strategy. This has further amplified deep animosity between the two Palestinian and UAE leaderships—an animosity that led the **[Palestinian Authority to recently reject UAE COVID-19 aid \(https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2020/06/palestinian-authority-reject-uae-aid-israel-normalization.html\)](https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2020/06/palestinian-authority-reject-uae-aid-israel-normalization.html)** when it sent a plane via an Israeli airport to deliver it. Yet such a reaction ignores the potential benefits of this breakthrough to the Palestinians themselves.

The most immediate plus is the removal of annexation from the agenda. Though Palestinian diplomacy (with help from Jordan, Egypt and other Arab and European countries) managed to create an international consensus against annexation, the threat remained palpable given that the **[Trump administration remained open \(https://www.timesofisrael.com/white-house-still-mulling-annexation-which-could-happen-this-month-source/\)](https://www.timesofisrael.com/white-house-still-mulling-annexation-which-could-happen-this-month-source/)** to the idea and Netanyahu continued to see it as politically necessary. Now, Israel has committed to

indefinitely freeze annexation—a commitment it made not only to the UAE but, more importantly, to Trump.

But beyond this near-term advantage for the Palestinians, history has shown that Arab countries that have relations with Israel—namely, Egypt and Jordan—are more effective in advancing Palestinian interests. Partly, that’s because they hold direct conversations with Israel, which doesn’t want to lose its ties to these two neighbors. But that’s also because in Washington and in the wider international community, their formal relations with Israel lend them more credibility than countries that do not have that status and are seen as automatically criticizing the Jewish state. The UAE will be a valuable and effective addition to this grouping, particularly as it extends the Israeli-Arab dialogue to the strategically important Gulf.

The Arab-Israeli peace process has been mired for many years. This vacuum has led to the hardening of positions among Palestinians and Israelis, and many international and regional actors have given up on the prospect of any progress between the two sides. Indeed, the two-state solution—the idea that the conflict can be resolved through dividing the Holy Land between Israel and a Palestinian state—has been **fast losing support** (<https://www.timesofisrael.com/support-for-two-state-solution-at-lowest-in-nearly-20-years-poll/>). Annexation would have put an end to any prospects for progress, as it would have made a future Palestine unviable. This new development can create a window to begin shifting these dynamics.

In a region that is accustomed to things only getting worse, this is a rare piece of good news. Israel and the UAE should be commended for this courageous act. The international community needs to capitalize on its momentum, and Arab and international friends of the Palestinians need to urge them to use this opening to explore ways of resuming Palestinian-Israeli talks within a wider regional context.

Ghaith al-Omari is a senior fellow at The Washington Institute and a former advisor to the Palestinian negotiating team. This article was originally published [on the NBC News website](https://www.nbcnews.com/think/opinion/israel-uae-deal-achieves-middle-east-rarity-it-s-win-ncna1236694) (<https://www.nbcnews.com/think/opinion/israel-uae-deal-achieves-middle-east-rarity-it-s-win-ncna1236694>). ❖

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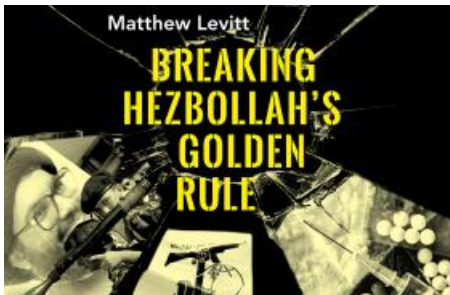
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