

# The Emerging Abraham Accords: The Challenges of Positive Change

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## Brief Analysis

Israel and the UAE have just embarked on a process that, assuming it matures successfully, will soon yield the fruit of full normalization between the two countries. The media coverage of the process has been largely optimistic, occasionally mentioning potential pitfalls regarding annexation and arms sales. Missing from this public and media discourse, however, are a host of other significant challenges this agreement may pose for Israel, the UAE, and to the region as a whole.

Since the August 13 trilateral (U.S.-UAE-Israel) announcement of the deal, the general media narrative about the normalization process has so far centered on the deal's dividends and benefits. Currently, the only obstacles to implementation frequently mentioned in the media are Israel's questionable commitment to freezing West Bank annexation and the possibility that the UAE will gain access to the advanced F-35 combat aircraft.

The discourse surrounding Bahrain-Israeli agreement has been different. For Bahrain—a small, Shia-majority country sandwiched between Qatar and Saudi Arabia—it is likely that continued American backing vis-à-vis Iran and an ongoing U.S. military presence in and around the tiny island played a bigger role in bringing the small Gulf nation into the agreement.

Indeed, the magnitude of this achievement is not to be understated—the beneficiaries of the deal have now gained strength against three radical and often threatening currents in the region: Iran and its proxies, political Islam backed by Turkey and Qatar, and Salafi jihadist organizations. In light of these threats, namely from Iran and Turkey, the UAE and Israel share an overarching vision of regional dynamics, and both see possible danger in the United States' growing distance from the region. UAE-Israel security and intelligence cooperation had already been sustained **at varying intensities** for a significant period of time, but the new agreement is important for its institutionalization of this security cooperation while also serving to broaden the economic and cultural dimensions of relations.

Yet a clear-eyed and balanced vision of the deal must also address the significant, overarching challenges that will

threaten the success of the agreement. There are some aspects of the Emirati-Israeli relationship that might have best been kept in the dark due to potential backlash from regional rivals Iran and Turkey. What's more, Israel and the UAE do not fully align on several key regional issues. For instance, Israel is likely to be more trigger happy vis-à-vis Iran in the Gulf, whereas UAE might feel similarly inclined in the Mediterranean regarding Turkey. Generally, while the deal fosters better security cooperation between the UAE and Israel in handling Salafi jihadist, Iranian, and Turkish threats, it also increases the intensity of those threats.

Notably, Bahrain has already faced an **attempted terrorist attack** by an Iran-backed group in response to its recent decision to normalize relations with Israel. Similarly, it is reasonable to assume that there may be efforts by Salafi jihadist terrorist organizations to undermine the security and stability of the hitherto tranquil UAE in retaliation for this perceived betrayal of the Palestinian people. Additionally, **Turkey has criticized the new agreement** with Israel in very sharp and explicit terms; one cannot rule out the possibility of Turkish and Qatari political backing, and even direct support, for Muslim Brotherhood attempts to shake the security and political stability of the Emirates.

Such a move could be more likely as the new agreement now firmly places the UAE in the anti-Turkish camp. **This decision comes at a time when the level of tension is on the rise in the eastern Mediterranean between Turkey and its opponents, including Egypt, Greece, and Cyprus—and Israel**, which sees itself as part of that grouping, though perhaps it should hedge its bets on this orientation. This tension, arising from conflicts over the future of natural gas mega-projects and their pipelines and shipping routes to Europe, along with the Turkish military and economic intervention in Libya, could lead to a severe escalation to the point of armed skirmishes with Egypt, or even a military confrontation between Turkey and Greece. The UAE, through ties with Israel, has now become more intimately connected with this growing potential for conflict.

Similarly, by standing so publicly with the UAE, Israel is taking sides in the dispute between that country and Qatar. Qatar is the most effective channel of communication with Hamas, and Qatar regularly transfers essential **monetary aid to Gaza**, both of which help to avert a full-scale conflagration between Israel and Hamas. The UAE cannot currently fill Qatar's shoes in this respect because it lacks meaningful influence in both Gaza and the West Bank, so Israel will continue to need Qatar's mediation and assistance. But in these newly created conditions, Qatar may well choose to create difficulties for Israel, taking advantage of the protracted crisis in Gaza in order to advance its own regional position and influence at the UAE's expense.

Compounding the issue, the UAE's influence in Palestine has already been suffering, both because it sees Hamas as an enemy and because it **severed ties with the Palestinian Authority** some years ago. The PA leadership—especially Mahmoud Abbas, his entourage, and remaining backers—have never made their peace with the de facto Emirati leader Mohamed bin Zayed's **efforts to groom the rival Palestinian pretender to power, Muhammad Dahlan**. **The PA's leaders even attribute** some influence over bin Zayed's decision to proceed with the normalization deal to Dahlan.

The deal further distances the UAE from both Hamas and the PA, opening further room for Turkish and Qatari influence. Either may encourage efforts by Islamist groups to destabilize Gaza as a means of emphasizing their own essential role there as a moderating factor, one whose opinions and interests must be taken into account. That being said, recent increased U.S. pressure on Qatar might bring it to normalize relations with the Arab Quartet—the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and Egypt—and thus make it easier for Doha to open its relations with Israel as well.

Yet the question of the United States may also become a concern in the coming months. Emiratis hope this deal, a dramatic historical step, will improve their image and leverage on Capitol Hill and earn them points in the eyes of the Trump administration in their rift with Qatar. The Emirati image in Washington has suffered in the past few years, mainly due to Emirati military intervention in Yemen's and Libya's civil wars and the consequent devastation in both

countries. The UAE's partnership with Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince Muhammed bin Salman, continually mired in controversy, has also harmed its reputation. The UAE has demonstrated that it hopes through this deal to increase cooperation with the United States and achieve access to advanced weapons systems.

Nonetheless, there exists some concern in the UAE, and in several other Gulf Arab states, about the potential for a Biden presidency. In their eyes, Biden would likely turn out to be soft on Iran and tough on the Gulf Arabs regarding human rights issues. Biden may well also link those issues to the sale of U.S. arms—arms that **Trump has been apparently ready to sell them** **Q**, scuttling a major draw for the UAE to the deal in the first place.

Looking ahead, this deal may also serve as an impediment rather than a motivator for other Arab countries to normalize relations with Israel, even with recent Bahraini announcement. To be sure, the UAE-Israel peace process erases the old automatic alliance between Palestinian leadership and Arab states, the organizing principle of the Arab Peace Initiative, by establishing ties with Israel without a Palestinian-Israeli peace agreement. That development is a boon to Israeli interests, but Israel now faces constraints on its future decisions regarding the Palestinian territories.

Israel has just confirmed, even if partially, its support for the principle of “land for peace” by **taking annexation off the agenda, for now** **Q**. In addition, the UAE has now acquired non-trivial leverage over Israel, which will henceforth have to consider UAE requirements any time it seeks to take various steps on Palestinian or other regional issues that might not accord with Emirati interests. For example, Jerusalem and Abu-Dhabi hold different positions regarding the Syrian regime—the UAE has warmed its relations with Assad in recent years while Israel still see the regime's actions, namely letting Iran use its territory to strike Israel, as *casus-belli*.

As these tensions play out, it is likely that any future debates between Israel and the UAE, especially those on Palestinian issues, will de-incentivize other Arab countries from normalization. Instead, those countries may prefer to remain on the fence and continue to watch from a safe distance. Each country has its own specific set of calculations and its own potentially critical domestic audience, and some will hesitate to take the plunge into open ties with Israel—all the more so if it becomes evident that even this type of agreement would fail to impact Israeli policy.

In all, this emerging deal is indeed significant, and no one should minimize its value. Yet one should also point out its challenging aspects, take stock of all its potential implications, and note well any difficulties and challenges hidden within it—precisely in order to assess, while there is still time, how to manage such possible challenges. ❖

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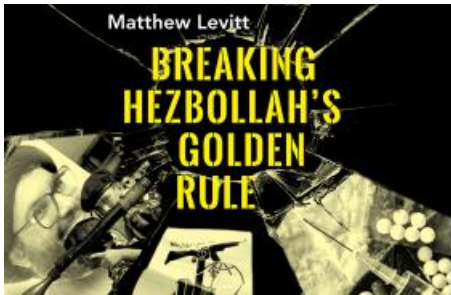


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