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UAE to Fund Israel and Jordan's Solar/Water Deal

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Brief Analysis

The trilateral agreement will combine long-established peace partners with one of the Gulf parties to last year's Abraham Accords, providing a model for broader normalization efforts.

On November 22, ministers from Israel, Jordan, and the United Arab Emirates will reportedly sign a landmark energy-for-water deal in Dubai. Under its reputed terms, a solar power plant will be built in Jordan to provide electricity for an Israeli desalination plant, which will in turn send water to Jordan. U.S. climate envoy John Kerry is expected to attend the ceremony.

The agreement will help address Jordan's pressing need for water while sending more electricity to Israel in a manner consistent with regional climate change concerns. Full details about the project are not yet available, though published reports do raise practical questions. Beyond the practical, however, the deal can facilitate important diplomatic goals and serve as a model for integrating the first generation of Arab peacemakers—Jordan and Egypt—with countries that have joined the Abraham Accords.

Breaking the “Cold Peace” Mold?

Although security relations between Jordan and Israel grew strong following their 1994 peace treaty, relations in the civilian sphere—whether government to government or people to people—remained cold. Economic relations resulted in some bilateral deals, such as the agreement under which Jordan buys Israeli natural gas from the Leviathan offshore field. Yet such deals have typically faced significant political opposition in the kingdom.

Currently, relations are recovering well from [their low point](#) under former prime minister Binyamin Netanyahu. Yet even at their best during the 1990s, they remained limited. As a result, the peace treaty has failed to address many common challenges such as climate change, water shortages, and electricity demands. This “cold peace” dynamic is similar to the pattern established after Egypt and Israel signed a peace treaty.

By contrast, when the UAE spearheaded the Abraham Accords last year, it seemed to usher in a new approach to Arab-Israel peace agreements. Unencumbered by the history of direct conflict that constrained Jordan and Egypt’s ties with Israel, civilian relations between the UAE and Israel have made great progress in a short period of time, building on their existing record of discreet ties. In 2009, for example, the UAE won the role of hosting the new International Renewable Energy Agency (IRENA) on condition that it allowed member-state Israel to establish a representative office in the Emirates—this despite the fact that the two countries did not yet formally recognize each other. Today, they have signed agreements in the commercial, tourism, medical, cultural, and other fields.

When last year’s UAE-Israel peace initiative first came to light, it directly affected an issue of broad regional concern: namely, heading off Israeli plans to annex parts of the West Bank. Afterward, however, their bilateral initiatives focused largely on bilateral issues. Despite bringing a few other parties into the Abraham Accords, UAE-Israel normalization did not have much impact on Jerusalem’s relations with its immediate Arab neighbors. The new deal with Jordan may represent a step toward changing that pattern.

Water Needs and Energy Deals Both on the Rise

In recent years, climate change and a large Syrian refugee population have worsened Jordan’s chronic water shortages. This year alone, six of the country’s fourteen dam reservoirs have dried up as rainfall dropped to 60 percent of its annual average. Israel transfers 50 million cubic meters of water to the kingdom each year pursuant to their peace treaty, and occasionally sells additional amounts as needed (e.g., an extra 50 million cubic meters this year).

The new solar-for-water announcement comes at a time when several other energy-related initiatives are afoot in the Middle East. On November 11, Syria signed an agreement with Emirati companies to build a solar power station near Damascus. In October, Jordan agreed to provide electricity to Lebanon via Syria. Similarly, Egypt announced in September that it would provide natural gas to Lebanon via Jordan and Syria. These arrangements have more political, economic, and technical complications than the Israel-Jordan-UAE deal, as will be analyzed in a forthcoming Washington Institute study.

Details and Challenges

According to unofficial details reported by the Israeli news portal Walla, the deal calls for the Jordanian solar farm to be operational by 2026 and produce 2 percent of Israel’s energy by 2030, suggesting a capacity of 460 megawatts. Israel will apparently pay \$180 million per year, to be divided between Jordan and the UAE. It is unclear what Israel will be paid for building the extra desalination capacity and sending more water to Jordan. No details are available regarding supply routes for the electricity or water, but in all likelihood they will be fully integrated into Israel’s existing grids.

Technical details are important because failure to get them right has undermined previous deals and their

diplomatic potential. This week, for example, Israeli energy minister Karine Elharrar called for the cancellation of an agreement whereby Emirati oil products would be [piped across Israel](#) from the southern port of Eilat to the Mediterranean coast, citing environmental concerns. Similarly, the delays and disagreements that led to the cancellation of the Red Sea-Dead Sea Water Conveyance Project generated diplomatic tensions between Jordan and Israel.

Diplomatic Implications

The new deal furthers two U.S. foreign policy objectives: addressing climate change and strengthening the Abraham Accords. Although the agreement was driven by the parties concerned, U.S. officials—particularly Kerry—played an important role in facilitating its conclusion.

Once implemented, the deal could bolster Jordan's stability by addressing its severe water shortage and providing help to the cash-strapped government. Israel, the UAE, and the United States all see the kingdom [as an ally](#) and are invested in its stability.

The deal also demonstrates additional ways to build on the Abraham Accords. So far, most of the diplomatic activity surrounding the accords has focused on adding new countries or deepening bilateral relations between Israel and its new partners. These efforts should be continued, but the solar/water deal shows how the accords can simultaneously deepen Israel's relations with the first generation of Arab peacemakers.

With the trilateral deal, the UAE will not only provide all-important financial resources, but also help create a context in which Jordan-Israel relations can proceed in a less-charged political environment. Criticism of Israel is common in the Jordanian media, but commentators tend to be more cautious when discussing a friendly Arab country such as the UAE, arguably Amman's closest Gulf ally. Abu Dhabi's role may have a similar effect on the Israeli domestic scene. Although Israel has traditionally been keener than Jordan to develop bilateral civilian ties, signs of politicization have emerged there as well. For example, Netanyahu recently criticized the current government's decision to sell more water to Amman. Framing the bilateral relationship within the Abraham Accords—which are immensely popular in Israel—can blunt some of that politicization.

Conclusion

Depending on its final details, the new trilateral agreement may highlight how Arab parties to the Abraham Accords can facilitate numerous areas of cooperation in Israeli-Jordanian (and Israeli-Egyptian) relations. Amman, Cairo, and Jerusalem seem ready for such progress, and the Abraham Accords countries are poised to assist in this regard. This dynamic also creates an opportunity for U.S. diplomacy to advance a more cooperative Middle East, as Kerry's engagement demonstrates.

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