

The UAE-Israel Breakthrough: Bilateral and Regional Implications and U.S. Policy

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Brief Analysis

Former diplomats and experts discuss what steps each party should take after the historic White House signing ceremony, and how to bring the Palestinians and other actors into the fold.

On September 14, The Washington Institute held a virtual Policy Forum with Ebtessam al-Ketbi, Dore Gold, Barbara Leaf, and David Makovsky. Ketbi is founder and president of the Emirates Policy Center, the UAE's leading foreign policy and security think tank. Gold is president of the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs and former Israeli permanent representative to the UN. Leaf is the Institute's Lapidus Fellow and former U.S. ambassador to the UAE. Makovsky is the Institute's Ziegler Distinguished Fellow and former senior advisor to the State Department's special envoy for Israeli-Palestinian negotiations. The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.

EBTESAM AL-KETBI

The Abraham Accords represent a new chapter for the Middle East, reflecting the tectonic shifts in the region in the last decade. The Emirati decision to normalize relations with Israel was determined by realities on the ground, including that there were no occupied territories that required negotiation and no history between the two countries on the battlefield. The normalization was based on genuine cooperation that serves both countries and the desire to establish a new security system. It is a peace based on options, not necessity. Bahrain took the same step as the UAE, and other countries will follow because normalization will enhance stability and prosperity.

The regional dynamics that precipitated the accords include shifts in the distribution of power in the Arab world—states that were in the center are moving to the periphery and vice versa. The treaty has consequences beyond Israeli-Emirati ties, for other Gulf countries, South Asia, and the East Mediterranean. The two parties to the treaty need to design strategies together that align with their interests, including on issues of security, military, economy, technology, medicine, and agriculture. They can also cooperate to effectively deal with unconventional threats such as food security, cybersecurity, and COVID-19.

The UAE's decision was partially influenced by the changing U.S. strategic assessment of the region, including the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action regarding Iran's nuclear program and the Obama administration's declared policy to pivot to Asia. The Gulf Cooperation Council and its allies felt that they had been forgotten when they were not consulted about the JCPOA. With the Abraham Accords, the United States will make a great mistake if it treats the deal as a "hit and run" and does not maintain its commitment to the region.

The UAE took a courageous step and has received condemnation from the Arab street, the Palestinians, and Qatar, a close U.S. partner. If Washington wants normalization to continue and spread in the region, it should help pave the road for each party to join. The other barrier Arab countries face is Israeli aggression toward the Palestinians, which is a hindrance to any country that wants to join this arc of stability.

In terms of domestic reaction, while the older Emirati generation was raised on a narrative that Israel is an enemy, the younger generation has a different view. The UAE has 200 nationalities and has learned how to ensure they function peacefully together. The Abraham Accords did not happen suddenly; there was a long period in which ties developed between Israel and the UAE, including ministerial visits, sports, and the Abrahamic Family House dedicated to religious tolerance. Lastly, the UAE now leans toward moderate Islam, and it has never been a closed society in terms of social freedoms or tolerance.

DORE GOLD

The Abraham Accords are a turning point in the Middle East. The UAE has become an important power not just in the Persian Gulf, but around the Horn of Africa. Israel touches on the same geographic region, creating many areas for cooperation. Both countries can use their alliance with the United States to shape responses to the Iranian threat. The Emiratis are very enthusiastic about the breakthrough, which Israel can surely appreciate as previous peace partners did not feel the same way. In turn, Israel will advocate for their peace partners in Washington, as they

did with the Jordanians.

The Abraham Accords create new possible security structures for the Middle East in the future. Israel is currently in a position similar to that of Europe at the end of World War II, when the United States was planning to pull out and Russia would fill the vacuum. In response, the United States created NATO. Security structures are very important in light of changes in the region, and partners can help design a different Middle East based on stable players. Israel has a legitimate argument about its qualitative military edge, but it is not against the Emiratis. If Israel suddenly decides to go easy on QME, the ultimate effect will be on other Arab states who are not at peace with Israel and would try to exploit such a QME pullback.

In terms of the Palestinians, the key is whether they are ready to consider reasonable proposals. President Mahmoud Abbas was not ripe for a deal toward the end of the Obama years, and the same situation holds today. Since the time of Israeli strategist Yigal Allon, it has been widely accepted that certain portions of the West Bank would be retained by Israel and certain territories would be returned. When Israel accepted the Trump peace plan, it accepted the territorial divisions in the proposal as being relevant for the future. Israel has the opportunity to work with Arab state partners on how to use normalization to impact the territorial configuration in a peace settlement with the Palestinians.

For instance, Palestinians need an arrangement to increase their gross national product; perhaps the new regional partnerships could facilitate routes for trucking and trains from Haifa to the West Bank to Jordan to the Gulf. The Palestinians would financially benefit as conduits for trade. It is important to consider how peace between Israel and Arab states can interact to create better outcomes for the region.

BARBARA LEAF

In the Emirati domestic arena, Crown Prince Muhammad bin Zayed took a series of steps in the past decade to foster a distinct sense of Emirati nationalism, particularly among youths. These initiatives reflected fears that modernization was affecting the country's small society, that the nation was losing its culture, and that the younger generation lacked a sense of responsibility to the state. Additionally, the UAE leadership was testing the waters on normalization—with its public as well as the region. UAE press coverage of Israel has been nonpolemical, and while the leadership took a cautious approach to the public visibility of the Israeli delegation when Abu Dhabi began hosting the UN International Renewable Energy Agency (IRENA) in 2015, increasing and deliberate visibility was given to people-to-people contacts. These moves were meant to set the Emirates apart in the region in U.S. eyes and in their people's eyes.

After 2011, turmoil continued unabated, and two quasi-blocs—Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Egypt on one side; Qatar, Iran, Turkey, and rejectionist groups like the Muslim Brotherhood, Hamas, and Hezbollah on the other—formed in the region. While normalization was driven by national security factors for the UAE, the Emiratis also considered the move critical to enhancing ties with the United States, maintaining bipartisan support in Washington, raising the relationship to the special “club” of strategic partners like Israel, and gaining access to certain advanced defense systems they had long sought. There is also a certain fatalistic line of thinking in the UAE's leadership that the region is moving toward a post-American era. In this regard, the deal can be seen as a hedge against that possibility, with the UAE looking for a defense/security relationship with the regional superpower, Israel.

UAE foreign policy is often defined by risk-taking; the strategic step to normalize relations with Israel was a carefully calculated risk, and accelerated an already visible trend line. Meanwhile, Washington has been wrestling for some time with how to deal with a more adventurous Emirati foreign policy, and a Democratic presidential administration would likely be more critical. The UAE has tried out much more assertive interventions in Yemen and Libya. In Yemen, the costs became too high, and the crown prince made the hardnosed decision to withdraw despite costs to

the Emirati relationship with Saudi Arabia. Libya provides an example of Emirati overreach, which will likely play into Congress's decision on the sale of F-35 jets and other advanced systems to Abu Dhabi.

It would be a mistake for this administration or a future one to focus exclusively on notching up more wins on normalization; that risks normalization occurring on a highly transactional basis, causing friction with other policies like QME. The question for the United States is how to build strategically on the breakthroughs that have already occurred, eventually moving toward resolving the Palestinian issue, which goes to the heart of Israeli and Palestinian security and prosperity. The better part of valor would be to respect the official reticence of other states for the moment, while focusing on encouraging partners in the region to do what the UAE began doing some years back—changing the environment within the country to prepare the public for formal normalization at some point. This means removing strictures on people-to-people contacts, promoting interfaith dialogue, altering the tone of government media toward Israel, and generally working to change the environment at home so that normalization does not remain forever unthinkable.

DAVID MAKOVSKY

The UAE-Israel deal has a compelling bilateral rationale. Both countries are wary of Iran and have clear views on the JCPOA and political Islam. This convergence has special importance amid long-term questions about the U.S. role in the region. The deal also facilitates a potential economic bonanza. While Israel's peace with Egypt and Jordan had significant strategic importance, the peace with the Emirates offers possibilities for investment. The normalization agreement also offers a warm peace that Israel has never witnessed before.

The deal is the result of an unintended multistage peace process. First came the Trump peace plan, which the Palestinians rejected out of hand. Additionally, Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu could not galvanize the Israeli right wing because he had not conditioned his base for territorial compromise. Second came the possibility of West Bank annexation, which was rejected due to international anger and the opposition of Israel's own strategic community. Third came the Emirates essentially bailing out the United States and Israel with the normalization agreement.

The deal is a great achievement, though it did not require the same level of risk that Menachem Begin took at Camp David or Yitzhak Rabin took with Oslo. The Emirates seized a tactical moment to extract bilateral security benefits from the United States, with President Trump facing an uphill election and seeking a breakthrough. The Emirates also likely saw the move as political risk insurance for the possibility of a post-Trump era, since a Democratic administration could have different views about the Gulf.

Regarding the Palestinians, the parties need to rethink the Arab Peace Initiative. The API is based on premises that were valid in 2002, when no Gulf states had bilateral relationships with Israel. The idea that Arab states would normalize relations after Israel resolved its conflict with the Palestinians was considered a carrot, but it is now seen as a stick—that is, a posture that would indefinitely defer relations with Israel at a very significant opportunity cost given the threat of Iranian regional influence. One sign of changing views is that when the Camp David Accords were reached in 1979, the Arab League broke relations with Egypt for ten years. Last week, however, the league simply stated that the UAE deal was a sovereign decision by an Arab country, and that it would not intervene.

While the Palestinians will surely wait to see the results of the U.S. election, they should try to coax the UAE rather than curse the decision. They have numerous disagreements with the Emirates that need to be resolved, often exacerbated by the rivalry between Abbas and prominent UAE-based Palestinian politician Mohammad Dahlan.

It is important to note that while many U.S. officials have recently made trips to the region in the context of the Israeli-Emirati breakthrough, Pentagon officials have not. Any F-35 sale would require negotiation between both defense communities, but their clocks are not currently in sync, even as the Trump administration and Netanyahu

push for wrapping the issue up by the end of the year.

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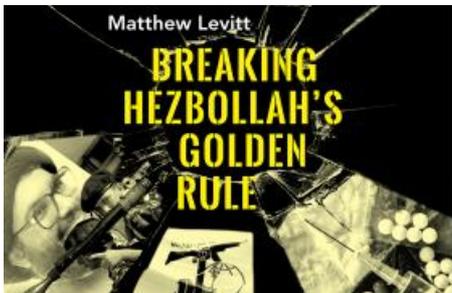
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