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The Road Beyond UAE-Israel Normalization

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🕐 Brief Analysis

Netanyahu's strategy of bypassing the intractable Palestinian issue has paid substantial dividends worldwide, but a peace treaty 'domino effect' is unlikely in the near term given various calculations in Riyadh and other Arab capitals.

To the extent that Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu and his rivals in Israel's fragile coalition government find time to spare from their uphill battle against the coronavirus pandemic, they are trying to chart a course for building on the momentum of their recent deal with the United Arab Emirates. The treaty—set to be signed September 15 at a White House ceremony—heralds the potential crumbling of official Arab refusal to recognize Israel as long as the Palestinian problem remains unresolved. It also carries the promise of rapidly constructing warm, active relations with the most dynamic state in the Persian Gulf, unlike the restricted, often cold peace Israel has with Egypt and Jordan.

Israelis understand the principal factor that motivated Emirati leader Muhammad bin Zayed to break ranks and unlock the shackles of the 2002 Arab Peace Initiative (API) : he sought to secure preferential status with the United States ahead of the November presidential election and upgrade the UAE's armed forces. Yet he also intends to access Israeli technologies and know-how in the economic, military, and security domains. The question is what role other Arab states will play in facilitating that progress and making normalization moves of their own.

NETANYAHU'S BYPASS DOCTRINE

Although he has never fully elaborated it in his writings or speeches, Netanyahu has refined his strategy on the

Palestinian issue to a simple realpolitikal formula over the past decade. It boils down to the following: an "end of conflict, end of claims" settlement with the Palestinians is currently unattainable on his terms, so he must therefore snatch away the longstanding Palestinian veto over Israeli relations with the rest of the world, especially the Arab states. According to this doctrine, the more Israel succeeds in forging healthy systems of cooperation with leading regional and international powers, the more it will pressure Palestinian leaders to review their current policies.

The strategy of bypassing the Palestinians has already provided Israel with substantial dividends. Close relationships have been established with myriad states that previously pursued negative or even hostile policies toward Israel.

Most prominently, official cooperation is expanding with Asian powers such as India, Japan, and Vietnam, while informal ties are growing with Indonesia. In a sense, Israel has performed its own undeclared "pivot to Asia" in the economic and security domains.

In Europe, a de facto alliance has emerged with Cyprus and Greece (previously the European Union's biggest critic of Israel). A wider system of cooperation over East Mediterranean natural gas fields is in effect with Italy and other partners, while friendly diplomatic ties have been cultivated with most East and Central European states.

Elsewhere, current Russian policy in the region often takes Israeli interests into consideration, and Moscow generally manifests a friendly approach to the Jewish state. Close cooperation has also been revived with a bloc of East African states, and efforts to build a similar framework with the Muslim counties of the Sahel are under way. Many Latin American capitals have likewise sought to improve their relations with Israel.

In light of such progress, many in Israel have been holding their breath for additional Arab states to quickly announce UAE-style agreements of their own. Yet they are bound to be disappointed—for many of these countries, reconciliation with Israel entails more complicated calculations. Although a few regional governments have voiced support for the UAE deal, all prefer to assess the ramifications of this dramatic event before making further moves.

PROSPECTS FOR SAUDI NORMALIZATION

The main player in regional normalization, Saudi Arabia, has taken a measured approach instead of rushing ahead as President Trump is urging. For one thing, Riyadh realizes that the Emiratis are not interested in becoming part of a pack right now; rather, they want to enjoy the benefits of a solo statesmanship performance at next week's White House treaty ceremony. Indeed, Abu Dhabi did not inform the Saudis about the deal until nearly the last minute. For this and other reasons, Riyadh signaled Bahrain that it should defer its own normalization plans with Israel, which have been the subject of debate in Manama for the past two years.

At the same time, the Saudis have taken steps to support the UAE deal even as they reaffirmed their adherence to the principles of the API. They quickly approved use of their airspace for flights between Abu Dhabi, Dubai, and Tel Aviv, cutting travel time by hours. They have also pressured the Palestinian Authority to stop insulting the accord publicly, and to prevent demonstrators from setting Emirati flags on fire.

Meanwhile, Saudi media outlets have denounced the Palestinian leadership and touted the benefits of peace with Israel. One typical article, published September 2 in *Okaz*, described President Mahmoud Abbas and his associates as "thieves." The author then argued that the interests of the people living in Gaza and the West Bank compel "wise Arabs" to distance themselves from the "gangs of political opportunism" and negotiate with Israel to ensure comprehensive peace in the region. In the religious sphere, the highest-ranking imam of the Grand Mosque in Mecca, Sheikh Abdul Rahman al-Sudais, hailed the Prophet Muhammad's good relations with Jews during his Friday sermon on September 4.

More important, secret communications with Riyadh have made Jerusalem quite confident that Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman is bent on normalizing relations at some future date, despite objections by some in the

Royal Court and his father's reluctance to abandon the API. In Abu Dhabi, Crown Prince Muhammad bin Zayed justified his agreement with Israel by noting that it prevented annexation of some areas in the West Bank from proceeding; his Saudi counterpart seeks a Palestinian achievement of his own to justify departing from traditional Saudi policy. Accordingly, Riyadh has supported Egypt and Jordan's efforts to convince President Abbas that he should resume negotiations with Israel under the auspices of a "Quartet plus Arab partners" formula. Abbas has flatly rejected the idea, instead opening limited coordination with Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad in order to "isolate" the UAE-Israel deal and deter other Arab states from forging agreements of their own.

CALCULATIONS IN OTHER ARAB STATES

T he Saudi hesitation to act without some progress on the Israeli-Palestinian front is affecting other candidates for normalization. In the Gulf, King Hamad of Bahrain has intensified his discussions with Israel and is seeking clarification about increased American assistance.

In Sudan, Generals Abdel Fattah al-Burhan and Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo keep assuring Israel that they intend to normalize but note that they must take into account resistance from the left-wing civilian government. Israel's request to use Sudanese airspace for flights between Tel Aviv and Latin America is currently under favorable discussion there.

In Oman, Sultan Haitham is reshuffling the government that served under his predecessor; this transition and his country's delicate relations with Iran make him more inclined to take a back seat. In Morocco, King Mohammed VI's relations with the UAE are strained, and although his country has maintained fruitful relations with Israel for decades, he does not feel the time is ripe for a bold leap. Mauritania, whose diplomatic relations with Israel are suspended, is currently preoccupied by a recent military coup that elevated officers with little experience on the international stage. Other Arab states have distanced themselves from the Emirati normalization model—most notably Tunisia, which in the past exchanged "interest sections" with Israel.

CONCLUSION

E stablishing incremental normalization arrangements with several states appears to be the likeliest route for near-term development of the Arab-Israel peace process, as opposed to an imminent series of historic UAE-style accords. The United States can help accelerate the pace of this gradual transformation by brokering, sponsoring, or taking part in specific initiatives. The most important step is to ensure rapid success of the UAE normalization deal as a model for other potential partners, encouraging them to surround the Palestinians with an Arab-Israel "peace belt" that ultimately convinces Ramallah to seek a deal.

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