

Qatar's Media Campaign Against UAE-Israel Deal Reflects a Wider Gulf Rift

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Brief Analysis

In the weeks since U.S., Emirati, and Israeli leaders announced a historic normalization agreement on August 13, Qatari media has leveled major criticism of the deal. Yet the motivations for this criticism seem to reflect direct competition between Qatar and the UAE as much as genuine critique.

The direct competition between the UAE and Qatar, combined with the [broader boycott \(https://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/gulf/2020/06/18/Qatar-caused-Gulf-boycott-by-demanding-out-of-Riyadh-Agreement-WTO-report\)](https://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/gulf/2020/06/18/Qatar-caused-Gulf-boycott-by-demanding-out-of-Riyadh-Agreement-WTO-report) of Qatar by the Arab Quartet—the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Bahrain— helps contextualize vocal, conflicting media responses to the deal, as Qatari, Saudi, and Emirati media have some of the broadest reach and largest influence regionally.

In Qatar, both semi-official and government-backed media have come out strongly against the deal, emphasizing Palestinian outrage and criticizing the UAE directly for the diplomatic move. Pro-Qatari government *Al-Sharq* newspaper mischaracterized the accord with a headline quoting Turkish President Erdogan, “ [History won't forgive the UAE for signing a deal with Israel \(https://url.emailprotection.link/?bilRzXMHwlpjwJpozibPDsF-wxxCMbb7_p9lsaKF0wXTGRt9f8mu6-5Ah2htW3PoM-H4f1OrUZelkHPG6QVfzDnHj3jDtdVbKHKQmfVJxC45iwTuL-WicgCkwec4Mw5vmp97R4P2I27t1-13AaPKw2EgtJ3eQxW1Puu0w03DXV6w~\)](https://url.emailprotection.link/?bilRzXMHwlpjwJpozibPDsF-wxxCMbb7_p9lsaKF0wXTGRt9f8mu6-5Ah2htW3PoM-H4f1OrUZelkHPG6QVfzDnHj3jDtdVbKHKQmfVJxC45iwTuL-WicgCkwec4Mw5vmp97R4P2I27t1-13AaPKw2EgtJ3eQxW1Puu0w03DXV6w~).” The same newspaper also ran the [headline \(https://url.emailprotection.link/?bi-JKJmuXX78oGJ5JZtlOkPHS6p0FvzFMYAHIYyYUC6s9CnfFEObp6wBHgBl5ZwyzMf_e6hJ5WupXkRqvIZmShYIUwoW1CDYWOU4520Fae17TbTYG_sfr804GsgAlo7IA\)](https://url.emailprotection.link/?bi-JKJmuXX78oGJ5JZtlOkPHS6p0FvzFMYAHIYyYUC6s9CnfFEObp6wBHgBl5ZwyzMf_e6hJ5WupXkRqvIZmShYIUwoW1CDYWOU4520Fae17TbTYG_sfr804GsgAlo7IA), “[MbS is ready to establish open relations... The mediator is the Jew Haim Saban 0.](#)”

State-owned [Qatar TV claimed \(https://url.emailprotection.link/?bq32pz2apk6e5NsTKJRtcSGs0o3Nev331tKsz7076RbeJQbyxakEdL8yRrInILG9qTWdp5nbZVi3SRfxQ4aMXm0RDiDurJKtV7cXLzsz1xy5I28tIUWrUr2bvHjPODSi4\)](https://url.emailprotection.link/?bq32pz2apk6e5NsTKJRtcSGs0o3Nev331tKsz7076RbeJQbyxakEdL8yRrInILG9qTWdp5nbZVi3SRfxQ4aMXm0RDiDurJKtV7cXLzsz1xy5I28tIUWrUr2bvHjPODSi4) that Israel had deceived the UAE and is not planning to stop annexation, featuring images of Israeli police forces stopping Palestinian protesters from burning the Emirati flag and images of Abu Dhabi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed (MbZ) inside Al-Aqsa mosque to claim that Israelis are protecting Emiratis from Palestinian outrage. Additionally, the Al-Jazeera channel aired tens of political shows in which interviewees from different Arab nationalities condemned the deal aggressively. Most of the coverage was directed specifically against the persona of the Emirati leadership, and the wording of these programs sought to delegitimize them.

In contrast, Arab Quartet media has pushed hard in the opposite direction as Emirati, Saudi, and Bahraini channels—with the notable exception of those channels affiliated with Bahrain's Shia opposition—have defended the normalization deal. The fourth member of the Quartet—Egypt—has been notably quiet.

Unsurprisingly, Emirati newspapers have glorified the deal as historic, conferring massive praise on MbZ for his success in stopping annexation in exchange for keeping the two state-solution alive. UAE media outlets were keen on hosting Israeli commentators fluent in Arabic to emphasize Israeli-Qatari relations, bolstering the Emirati narrative that Qatar's criticism is hypocritical. For example, Knesset member [Eli Avidar argued \(https://www.thenational.ae/world/gcc/qatar-deceived-arab-states-over-trade-office-says-israeli-politician-1.1066907\)](https://www.thenational.ae/world/gcc/qatar-deceived-arab-states-over-trade-office-says-israeli-politician-1.1066907) on Sky News Arabia that Qatar wants to have an exclusive relationship with Israel.

For a short period of time directly after the deal was announced, Saudi media seemed to be shocked and disoriented. However, this position quickly shifted to defend the UAE against Qatari propaganda, perhaps due to instructions from Riyadh. *Al-Arabiya* news has since published an [exclusive interview \(https://english.alarabiya.net/en/features/2020/08/23/Another-Israel-Arab-deal-expected-in-coming-weeks-Israeli-ambassador-to-US\)](https://english.alarabiya.net/en/features/2020/08/23/Another-Israel-Arab-deal-expected-in-coming-weeks-Israeli-ambassador-to-US) with Israel's Ambassador to Washington Ron Dermer, where he stated other Arab states will soon be engaging in normalization. The site also published a report on the status of the Jewish community in Dubai, and op-ed spaces were devoted for Israeli writers to talk about peace.

Well-known Saudi journalists have also penned op-eds praising the deal directly. Abdul Rahman Al-Rashed [wrote \(https://url.emailprotection.link/?bNPMowF6qTV8KahOccuQpJ5d2LLimTSdbz7ctGIPUD3tYQyG9fC-t07T-xWo10DXPZ9DK9jcXJZ5MdrHMcY5PnpYC10VaqIN3_R25tUhsPgQuu8l2u008IgxYsd5IKYEUsiCkyc9KfnBnLnRsofMrMrolN4pWtfBp9dSGbhyfb1Qmpd-ZjzkQyA_Z2VW9sqqtX8iR0vQOw7ZhfZHck6tA--\)](https://url.emailprotection.link/?bNPMowF6qTV8KahOccuQpJ5d2LLimTSdbz7ctGIPUD3tYQyG9fC-t07T-xWo10DXPZ9DK9jcXJZ5MdrHMcY5PnpYC10VaqIN3_R25tUhsPgQuu8l2u008IgxYsd5IKYEUsiCkyc9KfnBnLnRsofMrMrolN4pWtfBp9dSGbhyfb1Qmpd-ZjzkQyA_Z2VW9sqqtX8iR0vQOw7ZhfZHck6tA--) an article at the Saudi affiliate newspaper *al-Sharq al-Awsat* emphasizing the positive aspects of the deal and explicitly calling out Qatar for its double standards toward normalization. Al-Rashed emphasized Qatar's own relations with Israel, emphasizing their longstanding nature by pointing to then-Prime Minister Shimon Peres's [1996 visit \(https://www.upi.com/Archives/1996/04/02/Peres-signs-economic-accord-in-Qatar/6487828421200/\)](https://www.upi.com/Archives/1996/04/02/Peres-signs-economic-accord-in-Qatar/6487828421200/) to the Gulf monarchy. Though early speculation that Saudi Arabia would also begin peace negotiations with Israel appears unfounded, the fact that the Saudi media and prominent intellectuals backing the Israeli-Emirati normalization deal should be a sign for what is in store when MbS comes to power.

Given this clear split between Quartet and Qatari responses to the deal, Qatar's media response should be understood in the context of the ongoing intra-Gulf conflict. While there are other media outlets in the region criticizing the normalization deal, Qatari media has in some ways demonstrated itself to be the most aggressive. This may be because Qatar has much to lose from closer ties between Israel and the UAE.

Doha likely feels threatened by Abu Dhabi's new presence in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. Indeed, relations between Israel and Qatar have their own unique features; the latter [pays \\$30 million per month \(https://www.timesofisrael.com/gaza-families-begin-receiving-qatari-aid-payments/#gs.f4fjgi\)](https://www.timesofisrael.com/gaza-families-begin-receiving-qatari-aid-payments/#gs.f4fjgi) to Gaza, demonstrating the interest both sides place in ensuring that Gaza does not erupt. Most recently, there were reports of a visit by Mossad director Yossi Cohen [to Doha](#)

<https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20200224-mossad-head-visits-qatar-to-reinforce-ceasefire-in-gaza/>)—followed by reports that a cease-fire between Hamas and Israel had been brokered after the most recent flare up.

In contrast, Doha's inner circles remain suspicious of Abu Dhabi's actions in the region, and many elite Qataris share the belief that Abu Dhabi is not at all interested in reconciliation between the Arab Quartet and Qatar. The two sides are already engaged in extensive competition, visible mainly in their regional foreign policies and within Washington policy circles—the two sides have [invested \(https://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/07/us/politics/foreign-powers-buy-influence-at-think-tanks.html\)](https://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/07/us/politics/foreign-powers-buy-influence-at-think-tanks.html) massive amounts in American consultants, think tanks, and public relations firms. Given this background, the U.S.-brokered peace deal suggests that the UAE has now developed an edge in leveraging the White House and influential pro-Israel policy circles in D.C. when it comes to discussions of peace in the region.

Moreover, there is concern about the implications of a future Emirati embassy in Tel Aviv. Unlike the inactive Egyptian presence there, Emiratis will be proactive in engaging with Israel's diplomatic and economic elites. Emirati officials and intellectuals have already demonstrated their willingness to engage publicly by flooding Israeli media in the days after the peace deal, giving interviews and sharing their opinions on how to solve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Qatar had carved a unique space for itself in the Israeli-Palestinian peace process as a bridge between Israel and Hamas, but the UAE's new position threatens Qatar's ability to influence the situation through its own less public efforts. Especially threatening is the UAE's formidable financial capabilities, which stand in stark contrast to Jordan and Egypt.

Though the PA came out strongly against the negotiations, it appears that the UAE's weight is undeniable even in Palestinian circles, suggested by the major PA figure Saeb Ereket's [tweet \(https://twitter.com/ErakatSaeb/status/1303316053179731970\)](https://twitter.com/ErakatSaeb/status/1303316053179731970) in which he asked fellow Palestinians to refrain from attacking Emirati leaders or burning their flag. For decades, Palestinians insulted successive Egyptian leaders because of peace with Israel—this kind of public request from a senior Palestinian official has no parallel when Egypt was attacked.

With influence, Abu Dhabi may be able to shape the balance of power on hot button issues—Jerusalem being a particular flashpoint—in a way that is especially troubling for Doha and its allies in Ankara. In the past two decades, Qatari media and Turkish President Erdogan have placed great emphasis on a narrative defending Islamic holy sites in Jerusalem. For example, the Al-Jazeera channel has consistently aired reports on how the mosque—a key holy site in Islam—is in great danger from religious Jews protected by the “brutal” Israeli police forces, while promoting the narrative that Erdogan is its [true defender \(https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/11/erdogan-protecting-jerusalem-muslim-obligation-161129172754348.html\)](https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/11/erdogan-protecting-jerusalem-muslim-obligation-161129172754348.html). This messaging has taken advantage of Jordan's lack of financial resources and relatively light regional weight to overshadow Jordan's official custodianship of Al-Aqsa.

Now, Abu Dhabi will be granted the right to fly Muslims from its airports to visit Al-Aqsa mosque. Subsequently, Abu Dhabi's coordination of these religious trips is likely to destroy these claims and challenge the suggestion that these religious sites are in danger. These trips will also likely provide the Emirates with a new level of religious prestige as it presents itself as the bridge between the Muslim world and Al-Aqsa mosque.

As such, Qatari messaging should not be understood simply as a response to the deal itself; antagonism between the Emirates and Qatar is likely to fuel the attitudes of Qatari semi-official and government funded media for the foreseeable future. Moreover, this messaging is likely influential. A targeted campaign against the UAE-Israel deal at this moment has the potential to intimidate other Arab leaders from following suit on normalization; it can also empower voices of anti-normalization in Riyadh and Manama among other Arab capitals. Qatari media is certainly not the only Arab voice to come out against the deal, but special attention must be dedicated to this message and its potential impact on the ongoing regional response to peace between Israel and the UAE. ❖

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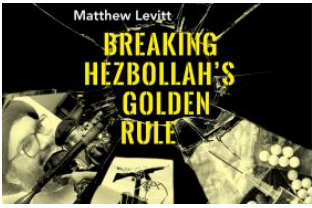
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