



# THE EMERGENCE OF GCC-ISRAEL RELATIONS IN A CHANGING MIDDLE EAST

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**T**he development of open, friendly relations between Israel and some Gulf Arab states has emerged as a significant new dynamic of the 21st century Middle East. In a region beset by widespread upheaval and civil war, shifting geopolitical alignments, and the competition between rival coalitions seeking to expand their spheres of influence and determine outcomes in weak and fractured states of the region, this dynamic has taken on a powerful strategic imperative for the Gulf side, in particular. While a formal relationship with Israel has long been held in check by the intractability of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the Palestinian national movement's diminished capacity to influence regional politics has given the Gulf states wider latitude to prioritize their national interests over "Arab" ones.

Although the diplomatic accords signed by the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Bahrain with Israel in 2020 constituted a breakthrough in relations, the lines of communication and cooperation between the Gulf states and Israel are not new. Multiple countries in the region, including Qatar, Bahrain, and Oman, established connections with Israel in the 1990s after the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) and Israel signed the Oslo Accords.<sup>2</sup> Although peace between Israelis and Palestinians was never consummated, the red line prohibiting a liaison with Israel among the Arab states was blurred. After Oslo, ties developed informally and clandestinely, largely kept under wraps because of the persistent taboo among Arab publics toward normalizing relations with Israel while the Palestinian people remain under Israeli occupation. In 2002, Saudi Arabia spearheaded the Arab Peace Initiative, which thereafter codified the proposed sequencing in Arab relations with Israel: first a Palestinian state on the 1967 borders, then normalization with the entire Arab world.

As the two sides expanded their cooperation in recent years, these backchannel links inevitably became more visible. So too, did publicity become an increasing part of the objective for the Gulf states as they sought the approval of Washington, which led, in part, to the groundbreaking normalization agreements signed by the UAE and Bahrain with Israel at the White House on September 15, 2020, marketed collectively as the “Abraham Accords.”<sup>3</sup> Still, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) is far from a unanimous bloc and the nature and scope of relations with Israel vary between the Gulf states.

Saudi Arabia, as part of this axis of like-minded states pursuing coordinated foreign policy objectives, shares strategic motivations with the UAE and Bahrain in regard to Israel. Indeed, Riyadh and Tel Aviv have cooperated covertly for years, mostly around security issues and intelligence-sharing, but the Gulf kingdom has its own calculus in terms of its readiness to formalize rela-

tions.<sup>4</sup> This includes its unique status in the Islamic world as the custodian of the two holiest places in Islam, and the legitimacy the House of Saud must protect in that role. The country is also much larger and more diverse than its counterparts, with powerful segments that do not perceive Israel favorably.<sup>5</sup> Still, the signaling from the political establishment, especially the younger generation led by Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, is clearly trending toward a different approach to Israel that does not preclude normalizing ties ahead of an Israeli-Palestinian peace deal.<sup>6</sup>

While Oman has yet to normalize ties with Israel, the Gulf state has long taken an outlier’s approach among the GCC members, publicly backing Egypt in its 1979 peace agreement with Israel and hosting senior Israeli officials as early as the mid-1990s, including late Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin, in 1994.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, unlike its compatriots in the region, Oman’s relationship with Israel does not stem from a desire to confront adversarial regional forces, but from Oman’s longstanding posture of neutrality and diplomacy, and the desire to maintain positive relations with all nations in the region, including Israel and Iran.<sup>8</sup> While this foreign policy was developed by the late Sultan Qaboos bin Said, his successor, Sultan Haitham bin Tariq Al Said, has appeared ready to maintain it, if possible.<sup>9</sup> However, given Oman’s weakening economic position, this stance could be contingent on Oman’s ability to preserve independence from the Saudi-UAE axis for its economic stability, a bloc that has shown few reservations over pressuring other countries to adopt its positions.

This was clearly the case for Qatar, which was subjected to a regional blockade by the Saudi-UAE axis over its discrete foreign policy from June 2017 until January 2021. Like Oman, Qatar prioritizes an independent foreign policy from its GCC neighbors, but one that includes developing a working relationship with Israel, which it has done since the mid-1990s. Doha has leveraged this relationship to play a more active role

than any of its GCC counterparts on the Israeli-Palestinian scene, particularly in Gaza as an intermediary between Israel and Hamas and as a financial stabilizer.<sup>10</sup> Given Qatar's broader regional posture and rivalry with the Saudi-UAE axis, in spite of their 2021 rapprochement, it is unlikely that it will formalize relations with Israel in the near term. In fact, it may be able to capitalize as the clear, but unstated, opposition to abandoning the Palestinians in favor of Israel. However, Qatar could conceivably follow the UAE and Bahrain on the path to normalization if the payoff becomes too large to ignore.

Finally, Kuwait is distinguished in the GCC as being publicly opposed to having relations with Israel while the Palestinian people remain under Israeli military occupation. Not long before his death in September, the late Sheikh Sabah Al Ahmad Al Sabah said Kuwait had no desire to change its regional policies and would be the last to normalize ties.<sup>11</sup> This continued fidelity to the Palestinians could be a result of the more representative nature of Kuwaiti politics compared to its peers, with an empowered parliament, and a fairly-developed intellectual elite with historic ties to Arab nationalist movements, including the once large and influential Palestinian expatriate community in Kuwait.<sup>12</sup>

## DRIVERS OF A NEW APPROACH

Among all the Gulf states pursuing relations with Israel, perhaps the UAE's motivations best encapsulate the changing regional dynamics. Contrary to the historically normative view of Israel in the Arab world, the UAE holds Israel to be neither an enemy nor threat to regional stability. According to the worldview of Abu Dhabi's Crown Prince Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan—who has been the de facto leader of the emirate since his elder brother's, the emir's, stroke in 2014—the principal threats to the UAE and its allies are an expansionist Iran and transnational political Islamists.<sup>13</sup> In this panorama, both of these malign actors have been willing and able to take

advantage of regional instability to advance their positions through foreign meddling or intervention—in the case of Iran—and the democratic process—in the case of the Muslim Brotherhood and its affiliates, who are backed by a rival coalition headed by Turkey and Qatar. In contrast, the UAE views Israel as a formidable regional power that shares these views and is willing to act forcibly to counter regional adversaries. A formal alliance with Israel, therefore, makes strategic sense. So, while the normalization agreements were billed by the Trump administration, which brokered them, as peace accords, they were clearly driven by coalition-building rather than peacebuilding.

Moreover, amid the threat posed by the spread of popular uprisings in the region, the Gulf states have become eager purchasers of sophisticated surveillance technology in order to more effectively police their populations.<sup>14</sup> For its part, Israel has been a willing purveyor of this technology with few reservations for possible human rights abuse.<sup>15</sup> This has given a corollary benefit to their relationship and offered new commercial pathways that have dovetailed with the UAE's own ambitions of becoming a regional technology and innovation hub. Moreover, "since normalization," the sides have announced a number of areas of commercial cooperation, including plans for an oil pipeline running from the Red Sea to the Mediterranean.<sup>16</sup>

But most significant of all, the Saudi-UAE axis views a closer relationship with Israel as an indirect means of preserving its partnership with Washington. This motivation is largely shared across the GCC because of the importance of the decades-old American-backed security architecture in the region. However, in recent years the Gulf states have had ample reason for concern about America's long-term commitment. In particular, lengthy and costly American wars have generated fatigue at home with continued military engagement in the Middle East. And while energy security was once the bonding agent of the U.S.-Gulf alliance, a resurgence in American

energy production over the past decade has created the perception of it coming unglued. As a result of these and other factors, successive U.S. administrations have signaled a desire to modify, and perhaps reduce, America's posture and presence in the region—a sentiment that may only deepen as a result of the economic costs of the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>17</sup> For the Gulf states, however, which are highly anxious about the regional outlook, retaining America's commitment to their security is paramount.<sup>18</sup>

Given America's dedication to Israel's security, the Gulf states may reasonably assume that creating linkages with Israel will help shore up their own security ties with the United States. Rightly or wrongly, the Gulf states perceive American foreign policy as exceedingly sensitive to Israeli interests and concerns. What the Gulf states also know from experience is that being Israel's ostensible enemy has not aided their relationship with the United States, has not endeared them to certain quarters of the American political and diplomatic establishment, and has obstructed their acquisition of advanced military hardware and technology reserved for Israel, and other close allies outside the region.<sup>19</sup>

There is reason to put stock in this analysis. Egypt has been a longstanding example for the Gulf states of what a formal alliance with Israel can equate to in Washington. After signing a peace treaty with Israel in 1978–79, Egypt moved into the U.S. strategic orbit and became the second largest recipient of American economic aid and military assistance, despite its authoritarian politics and poor human rights record.<sup>20</sup> While the Gulf states are already partners of Washington and do not need U.S. financial assistance, they recognize that Egypt's role as peace partner to Israel has made it seemingly indispensable in America's strategic regional foreign policy.<sup>21</sup>

So, could a different relationship with Israel salvage the Gulf states' fading importance in the U.S. strategic assessment and neutralize officials

who wish to “rethink” Saudi ties altogether?<sup>22</sup> The Saudi-UAE axis appears to believe so and is betting that a new regional security alliance with Israel can be the bonding agent of the future.

Moreover, Israel and the Gulf axis have found common cause in trying to steer America's Middle East policy in a mutually beneficial direction.<sup>23</sup> In particular, the two sides viewed the Obama administration's pursuit of a nuclear agreement with Iran, and subsequently an end to Iranian isolation, as troubling and dangerous. Finding ways to counter the Obama administration's agenda became an opportunity for the two sides to work together without U.S. involvement—a significant step in the development of this relationship—and the eventual basis for working with the incoming Trump administration in 2017.<sup>24</sup>

Indeed, this strategy proved quite successful as the Trump administration made forging a deeper Gulf-Israel alliance the anchor of its Middle East foreign policy. In doing so, the administration offered virtually unqualified support to both sides, exited Obama's signature Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) nuclear agreement and implemented a “maximum pressure” campaign against Iran.

However, the UAE's decision to formalize relations with Israel in September 2020 should not be viewed solely through the lens of its relations with the Trump administration, but also in consideration of the potential return to Democratic Party rule ahead of the U.S. election less than two months later. As was likely expected at the time, both sides of the political aisle, including the Biden campaign, welcomed the normalization agreements irrespective of the growing politicization of U.S.-Gulf relations under the Trump administration, the increasingly negative view of Saudi-UAE policies inside progressive Democratic circles, or the emphasis placed on the need to recalibrate U.S.-Saudi relations.<sup>25</sup> Nonetheless, despite Joe Biden's triumph in the November 2020 election, major changes in the

relationship between the U.S., UAE, and Saudi Arabia were not forthcoming several months into his presidency.

## RISKS AND COSTS

While public relations in Washington are an important component of Gulf-Israel ties, so too is the perception in the Middle East, where the risk to having this relationship has long been prohibitive. Yet among regional governments the reaction to the advancement of Gulf-Israel relations in general, and the UAE-Israel normalization agreement in particular, has ranged from neutral to positive. The exceptions were, unsurprisingly, Iran and, ironically, Turkey, which maintains extensive ties with Israel in spite of its estrangement under the presidency of Recep Tayyip Erdogan.<sup>26</sup>

This reception to normalization is a dramatic departure from the past. Egypt, for example, was suspended from the Arab League for a decade after signing a peace deal with Israel in 1979, despite its capital city hosting the institution. This difference between then and now likely attests to the growing influence of the Gulf states over other countries in the region; to the erosion of Palestinian political leverage; and to the diminished zeal attached to their cause (although this dimension is widely debated). For their part, Palestinians largely viewed the normalization agreement as an act of “betrayal” and denounced it in strong terms. Nonetheless, the Mahmoud Abbas-led Palestinian leadership failed in its attempt to have the agreement condemned at the Arab League.<sup>27</sup>

Among Arab publics the reaction has been relatively muted. Certainly, public opinion in the Middle East, especially in the Gulf, is difficult to gauge given the general suppression of free speech, undemocratic rule, and a lack of polling or independent media. There have been some notable signs of opposition, including in Bahrain where eight political societies and 23 civil society groups released joint statements objecting to the normalization deal, an Emirati association was

established to resist normalization, and a petition was signed by Emirati activists, lawyers, and businessmen voicing dissent.<sup>28</sup> And what does exist of regional opinion polling, such as the Arab Opinion Index, has shown overwhelming opposition to recognition of Israel.<sup>29</sup> Nonetheless, popular backlash in the streets has not been a factor.

In assessing risk, however, it is important to understand the context in which processes occur and how likely that context is to change over time. In this particular case, Gulf-Israel ties were initiated after the signing of the Oslo Accords, when the peace process with the PLO opened the doors for others to engage Israel. Importantly, the persistence of Oslo well past its mandate continued to provide political cover to the relationship in spite of Israel’s ongoing occupation and oppression of Palestinians. After nearly three decades, however, the Oslo process is exhausted and is at its end. If the post-Oslo stage is marked by popular mobilization against Israeli annexation and permanent rule, it could cast the relationship between the Gulf states and Israel in a harsher light. Indeed, it is even possible for the Gulf states to be drawn into direct support of Israel’s occupation.<sup>30</sup>

In fact, an early test to the resilience of these normalization agreements came in April and May 2021, when widespread Palestinian protests in Jerusalem during the holy month of Ramadan were violently dispersed by Israeli security forces, including harrowing raids on the Al-Aqsa Mosque compound—one of Islam’s most sacred sites—during the holiest month of the year, in which Israeli forces launched stun grenades and tear gas into the mosque itself. The subsequent bombing of the Gaza Strip by Israel, in which dozens of children were killed, and communal violence between Jews and Arabs in Israeli cities added to the pressure. While the events were unlikely to lead to backtracking on a long-term strategic decision like normalization, they clearly made the normalizing states uncomfortable, produced a backlash from within their societies, and demonstrated that without an end to Palestinian subjugation

such uprisings will reoccur and continue to test the Gulf-Israel relationship.<sup>31</sup>

In addition to risk, the relationship comes with a cost. One of the last remaining issues of consensus and unity among Arab states is support for the Palestinian cause—a valuable commodity for a region increasingly fractured and at odds. The Arab Peace Initiative also remains a signature achievement in bringing together the commitment of the entire Arab world to normalize relations with Israel in exchange for peace with the Palestinians. Abandoning this initiative is a great loss, even if it had failed to gain traction over the past two decades. So too is the forfeiture of unified backing for the Palestinian people, as securing their freedom and rights remains a moral imperative for the region and the world.

To conclude, relations between most Gulf states and Israel are not new or uniform, but changes in regional dynamics have given some GCC members a new strategic imperative for drawing closer to their former adversary. Animated by a host of regional threats and the need to keep the United States engaged in their security, the Saudi-UAE axis has broken with the Arab world's longstanding Palestine-first policy in pursuit of an alliance with Israel. While these states have deemed normalization more of an asset than a liability at this juncture, an open relationship is not without risks and costs that may become more apparent down the road.

## ENDNOTES

- 1 Omar H. Rahman is a writer and political analyst focused on Middle East politics and American foreign policy. He is a visiting fellow at the Brookings Doha Center, where he is writing a book on Palestinian de-fragmentation in the post-Oslo era. His writing and analysis has appeared in *The Washington Post*, *Foreign Policy*, *The Guardian*, *The National Interest*, *Rolling Stone*, *VICE*, *Quartz*, *Lawfare*, *Al-Jazeera English*, and *World Politics Review*, among others. The author would like to thank the research and communications teams at the BDC for their support and for expanding the paper's readership through publishing in Arabic. He would also like to thank his father for always being his sounding board.
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