



MIDDLE EAST STUDIES

AT THE MARINE CORPS UNIVERSITY

MES Insights - Volume 12, Issue 2 - April 2021

Israeli-Emirati Relations and the Iranian Challenge

By Dr. Ehud Eilam

On 15 September 2020 Israel, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and the Kingdom of Bahrain signed an accord normalizing relations between Israel and these Arab states. The United States assisted by serving as a broker. The other Arab states *de facto* accepted this quite dramatic development basically by ignoring it. Egypt and Jordan, in 1979 and 1994 respectively, previously signed peace agreements with Israel, so there was a precedent for the two new agreements with the UAE and Bahrain, but one which was over twenty-five years old.

In approving the agreement, Muhammad bin Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan, the Crown Prince of the Emirate of Abu Dhabi and the *de facto* leader of the UAE, took a certain risk not only in regard to the UAE's position in the Arab world but also, and primarily, *vis-à-vis* Iran. Iran opposes the Abraham Accords between the UAE and Israel because it sees Israel and the U.S. as its archenemies. Tightening relations among Israel, the U.S., and the UAE concerns Iran because of the proximity of the UAE to its borders. Iran's opposition to the agreement may lead to increasing tensions between the UAE and Iran, threatening the former and necessitating the formation of an Arab alliance to defend against potential Iranian aggression.

The Evolution of the Responses of Arab States to Rapprochement with Israel

In 1979, Egypt became the first Arab state to sign a peace treaty with Israel after a costly conflict between the two countries that went on for three decades and involved several wars including the 1967 and 1973 Wars. (1) Israel and the UAE, in contrast, have never fought each other in a war, which made it easier for both countries to end their conflict formally with the signing of the Abraham Accords. Israel and the UAE also do not have direct territorial disputes because they do not share a land or sea border. Both Israel and the UAE are also U.S. allies. The agreement between these two close U.S. allies has the potential to increase cooperation between the U.S. and its Middle Eastern partners. The UAE and Israel can assist the United States in the fight against their common enemies: Iran and Islamic State (ISIS/ISIL).

In 1979, in response to Egypt's agreement with Israel, the Arab League and Arab states individually rejected the validity of the peace treaty. Egypt was expelled from the Arab League and was only allowed to return ten years later. In 1994 Jordan signed a peace treaty with Israel without facing the same negative reactions from the Arab League and other Arab governments. By then the Arab world, which had grown accustomed to the peace between Israel and Egypt, was willing to accept peace between Israel and Jordan as well. The 1993 Oslo Accords between Israel and the PLO (Palestine Liberation Organization), which were supposed to end the conflict between them, also made it easier for Arab states to tolerate the Israeli-Jordanian peace treaty.

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Dr. Craig Whiteside (Naval War College)

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The lack of a coherent and consistent lens through which to understand Islamic State's transnational enterprise is undermining our understanding of the significance of the group's global agenda. Islamic State's self-proclaimed "caliphate" today is best understood as an adhocatic global insurgency—an irregularly managed collection of diverse, geographically dispersed militant groups competing to govern in suitable areas—the character of which is reflective of the ideological compulsion, strategic principles, and organizational traits that underpin the ambitions of its larger political project. Drawing on a spectrum of case studies, this lecture will address what these mean for both Islamic State's core and its global provinces.

Dr. Craig Whiteside is Associate Professor of National Security Affairs at the U.S. Naval War College at its resident program at the Naval Postgraduate School.

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The 2002 Arab Peace Initiative (2) was a major event in Arab-Israeli relations, which, together with the 1979 and 1994 peace treaties, helped pave the way for the UAE to make peace with Israel last year. In 2020, the majority of Arab states *de facto* accepted the Abraham Accords. The Palestinian Authority (PA), Turkey, and Iran opposed the accords. Iran rejects having any ties with Israel. Turkey did not want Israel to improve its position in the region because it would come at the expense of Turkish-Israeli trade and tourism. (3) The PA wants to prevent Arab states from accepting Israel until there is a recognized Palestinian state. The PA tried to block the UAE from signing the agreement by approaching the Arab League, but this attempt failed, in large part because the PA's popularity in the Arab world is not high and the weight of the Palestinian cause has declined. (4) In 2020 "Arab financial aid and grants for the Palestinian budget decreased by 81.6%." (5) Furthermore Arab governments understand they must focus on their internal, domestic matters including economic development and on protecting themselves from outside threats such as Iran, so Arabs see benefit in having friendly ties with Israel. (6)

The United States' role in brokering the agreement between Israel and the UAE was a major factor in convincing Arab states to accept it. Many Arab states need the U.S. for various reasons, and they certainly do not wish to go against U.S. interests or foreign policy, unless they really must do so for their own national interests. The agreement between Israel and the UAE did not bother most of the Arab states, and, in a way, the Abraham Accords serve the Arab states' own national and regional interests. They want to profit from both establishing and maintaining some ties with Israel and also maintaining good relations with the U.S. as well.

Israel - UAE Relations as a Model

By February 2021, in just over five months following the signing of the accords, trade between Israel and the UAE reached a total value of over \$270 million. (7) Both Israel and the UAE should exploit economic opportunities in trade, tourism, and the cyber economy, to name a few areas opened by the public normalization of relations. This could be a model for how future peace agreements between Israel and other Arab states can be forged. UAE-Israel relations can also help in ending Israel's cold peace with Jordan and Egypt.

The Abraham Accords and the warming of Israel-UAE relations has introduced the potential for mutual security cooperation. This can serve as a model for similar security agreements between Israel and other Arab states that, like the UAE, have not fought a direct conflict with Israel. Such agreements and security cooperation would reduce tensions between Arab states and Israel by helping them work together to forge mutually beneficial political, military/security, and economic relationships. The UAE could, in this way, serve as a test case of what happens if and when an Arab state dares to not only publicly recognize and sign a peace agreement with Israel but also cooperate openly with it in the interest of mutual security. Thus far, though Jordan and Egypt cooperate with Israel on joint security initiatives, they continue to keep a low profile about doing so. The forging of a successful new mutual security agreement between the UAE and Israel may enable Jordan and Egypt to be more public about their own security cooperation while also encouraging other Arab governments to take a chance and forge their own agreements with Israel.

While the 2020 accords and the continuing development of UAE-Israel relations, if successful, may serve as a positive example to other Arab states thinking of normalizing relations with Israel, the stagnation or failure of the normalization process can also serve as a negative example, proving harmful to Israel, the UAE, and other Arab states and having a negative impact on the U.S. diplomatic position and standing in the Middle East and North Africa.

The Case of Mauritanian-Israeli Relations: What Could Go Wrong

The history of Mauritanian-Israeli relations is a clear example of how the normalization process can be knocked off track. Mauritania recognized Israel in 1999. (8) Though Mauritanian-Israeli relations survived the 2006 war between Israel and Hezbollah in Lebanon, the December 2008-January 2009 conflict between Israel and Hamas in the Gaza Strip resulted in Mauritania cutting off diplomatic ties with Israel. Mauritania could have tolerated the casualties and infrastructure damage that was inflicted in Lebanon in 2006 by Israel but not when it happened to Palestinians in the Gaza Strip in 2008-2009. This was because of the high sensitivity among many Arabs to the continuation of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The sensitivity of the Palestinian issue will continue in the foreseeable future to be a major possible burden and stumbling block for Israel and the UAE in further developing their relations. If there is another war between Israel and Hamas, which might occur at any time, then the UAE might find itself in a tough spot, particularly if there are heavy casualties among the Palestinian population. The UAE might not cut its ties with Israel as Mauritania did, but the two states will have to keep a low profile at least until the end of any future conflict between Israel and the Palestinians. The UAE's decision will depend on how much importance it places on maintaining ties with Israel versus the continued salience of the Palestinian issue and will thus, in this situation, serve as a bellwether for the continued evolution of UAE-Israel relations.

The Iranian Challenge

Israel and Iran used to be allies until the Iranian Revolution in 1979 and the toppling of Muhammad Reza Pahlavi, the final shah of Iran. During the Iranian Revolution, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini and his supporters rose to political power. Since then, Iran has seen Israel as its arch-enemy. (9) The UAE and Israel have similar interests, including in the security arena vis-à-vis Iran and its allies and proxies. Iran is the biggest regional challenge for Israel, the UAE, and the U.S. because Iran is eager to be the dominant power in the Middle East. Iran is actively seeking to reduce U.S. influence in the region while expanding its own through alliance-building with non-state actors in Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, Yemen, and other countries. Fearing U.S. power and reeling from U.S. soft power, chiefly the sanctions which have crippled Iran's economy, Iran is also keenly aware that the U.S. military can inflict a devastating blow in the case of an open war. Iran sees the U.S. as the leader of the anti-Iran camp, which includes both Israel and the Arab Gulf states, and sees disrupting normalization between Israel and Arab states as in its national interest.

For its part, Israel considers Iran's routinely proclaimed desire for Israel's destruction to be a real threat, despite the superiority of Israel's military and its possession, according to international sources, of nuclear weapons. (10) Israel has made clear its strong opposition to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), an agreement about Iran's nuclear program, which was signed in July 2015, between the U.S., France, Germany, UK, Russia and China on one side and Iran on the other. (11) Seeking to prevent what it sees as Iran's attempt to develop nuclear weapons, Israel continues to carry out a pincer movement, a process involving making peace and normalizing its relations with Arab states such as the UAE while simultaneously and routinely striking militarily against Iranian and Iran-connected targets in Syria. The goal of Israeli military strikes in Syria is to prevent Iran from establishing a strong operational foothold in that country that could later be used to launch attacks against Israel.

Israel seeks to engage the UAE and other Arab Gulf states that fear what they see as Iranian regional expansionism, playing off of ethnic and sectarian differences between Iran, a non-Arab majority Shi'ite Muslim country, and Arab Sunni Muslim majority countries like the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Kuwait. Iran continues to exploit the decline of some Arab states to

expand its own regional influence, including Iraq post the 2003 invasion, Lebanon through Hezbollah and the continuing dysfunctionality of the sectarian governmental system, and Yemen and Syria after the start of these two countries' civil wars in 2014 and in 2011 respectively. By expanding its support in these Arab states, Iran hopes to counter the U.S., Israel, and rival Arab Gulf states to become the dominant power in the Middle East.

Though, according to Barbara Leaf, the former U.S. ambassador to the UAE (2014-18), Emirati leaders made it clear to her that their desire to normalize relations with Israel was not aimed at Iran, Iran still sees the Abraham Accords as being "directed against it." (12) Despite never having fought a direct war against each other, the UAE and Iran are backing different sides in Yemen's civil war, though both countries still maintain a robust level of bilateral trade. Though the UAE's military has become the most capable in the Arab world, its rulers remain concerned about their larger, more populous neighbor, Iran. (13) The UAE needs support from both the U.S. and Israel to develop defenses against potential Iranian attacks or covert operations.

While today most Arab states are unwilling to openly fight side-by-side with Israel due to the public opinion among their populations, the extent Arab states, such as the UAE, are willing to go can be tested first in joint Arab-Israeli military exercises. The U.S. is uniquely placed to play a role in facilitating such exercises under the auspices of the existing Iron Union, the name for joint U.S.-Emirati military exercises, perhaps first by enabling Israeli personnel to participate as observers. This may open the door to a further upgrading of Israeli-Emirati relations and cooperation, (14) which would send a strong message of deterrence to Iran. It could be the first step in building an anti-Iranian coalition with US support.

The Impact of the Israeli Election

In mid-March 2021 Israel cancelled the visit of Jordan's Crown Prince Hussein bin Abdullah to the al-Aqsa Mosque due to a dispute on a security issue. The Hashemite Kingdom retaliated by refusing to allow the plane of the UAE's crown prince, Muhammad bin Zayed, to take Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu from Amman to Abu Dhabi. (15) A few days later the UAE suspended plans for a summit in Abu Dhabi with Israel, the U.S., and other Arab states. This cancellation was in protest of Netanyahu's entangling the UAE in Israel's then ongoing domestic elections. (16) The results of the election did not change the political stalemate in Israel mostly because neither side won convincingly at the ballot box. Neither Netanyahu and his political allies or the fractious Israeli opposition coalition may be able to form a stable government, which will lead to a continuation of the long-running domestic political crisis and increase the likelihood of yet another election, (17) the fifth one in less than three years. The ongoing political uncertainty in Israel in recent years did not prevent Israel from building its ties with Arab states, including achieving a breakthrough with the UAE. However, as long as the political situation in Israel continues to be fragile, it can have negative ramifications on both Israel's position in the region and its relations with Arab states.

Conclusion

It was easier to normalize diplomatic relations between Israel and the UAE than it was in 1979 between Israel and Egypt, in large part because the UAE and Israel had never fought a direct war against one another, in contrast to Israel and Egypt. Most of the Arab world accepted or just ignored the signing of the Abraham Accords between the UAE and Israel. The PA opposed the normalization but failed to mobilize support against the UAE, suggesting that the Palestinian issue has lost some of its weight with at least Arab governments if not in general public opinion. Nevertheless, the UAE took a risk that seems to be in its own domestic and regional interests.

The agreement between Israel and the UAE, with continued U.S. support and mediation, opens new opportunities for cooperation in the economic, political, and military spheres for all three countries. The U.S., UAE, and Israel might even join forces to confront their common enemy, Iran and its proxies. Additionally, relations between Israel and the UAE as well as other Arab states might be the foundation of an anti Iranian alliance. The United States can encourage Arab states to build such an alliance by focusing on what each Arab state can contribute to such a pact. It will be easier for some Arab states to send troops to participate in joint exercises while others will prefer to restrict their cooperation to providing money to an alliance. Levels of participation will also depend on the benefits and risks to each Arab state. Gulf Arab states should be more worried about rising Iranian regional power due to their proximity to that country.

Dr. Ehud Eilam is an independent scholar. He has been studying Israel's national security for more than 25 years. He has served in the Israeli military and worked for the Israeli Ministry of Defense as an analyst. Eilam has published six books in the U.S and U.K.

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