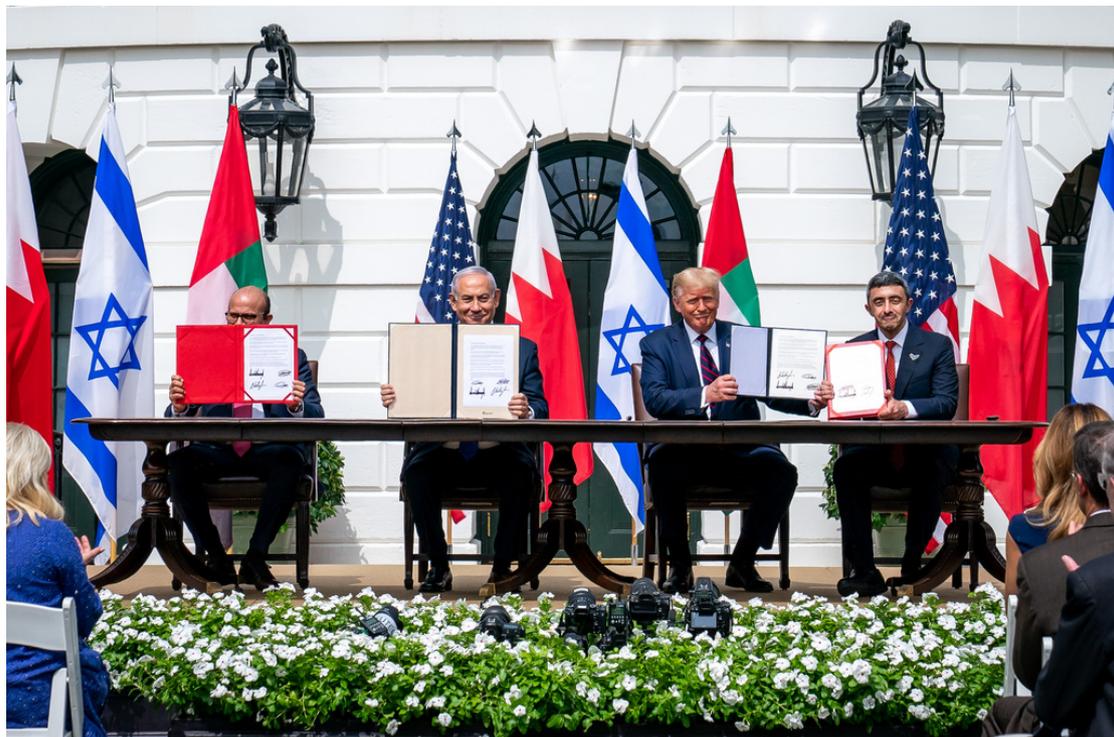




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The Gulf States and Israel after the Abraham Accords

→ Fatiha Dazi-Héni



U.S. President Donald Trump (2nd R), Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu (2nd L), UAE Foreign Minister Abdullah bin Zayed Al Nahyan (R) and Bahrain Foreign Minister Abdullatif bin Rashid Al Zayani (L) attend a signing ceremony for the agreements on "normalization of relations" reached between Israel, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Bahrain at the White House in Washington, United States on September 15, 2020. © The White House / Tia Dufour



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Israel has had direct relations with some member states of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC)¹ for over two decades. Oman and Qatar were the first to establish direct trade relations with Israel by establishing trade offices in their capitals in 1996. However, it is the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain that recently normalised relations with Israel at an official ceremony held in Washington on 15 September 2020, where they signed the general peace agreement known as the Abraham Accords.² With just a few weeks to go before the US presidential election on 3 November 2020, this was the occasion for President Trump to position himself as the mastermind of a new cycle of peace commitments by the Israelis and Arabs.

Yet the Abraham Accords are motivated by quite different factors than the Israeli-Egyptian (1978) or Israeli-Jordanian (1994) peace agreements, which were based on the principle of peace in exchange for land occupied by Israel in 1967. In contrast to the treaties of the 1970s and 1990s, the Abraham Accords largely ignore the Palestinian question. They are bilateral agreements that address security interests prompted by the Iranian issue, thereby bringing these two Gulf states closer to Israel, as well as economic and strategic interests. They also give Israel unprecedented direct access to the Arabian Peninsula and the Persian Gulf.

A number of questions arise. What exactly happened in the region between the establishment of trade missions in 1996, the adoption of the Arab peace plan at the Summit of the League of Arab States (LAS) in Beirut in March 2002 (conceived by Riyadh), and the normalisation of relations between Israel and some Gulf states in 2020?

What are the motives and expectations of the UAE and Bahrain? What is the significance of this normalisation, which gives Israel a direct and lasting entry to the geopolitics of the Persian Gulf and Arabian Peninsula? What does the US take away from the Abraham Accords for its Middle East policy? While being careful not to provide definitive answers, these questions require a close look at the regional political and security context.

The impact of the normalisation of relations between Israel, the UAE, and



Bahrain in the Gulf region

A clear rapprochement on security matters was discernible between Israel, the UAE, and Bahrain from the early 2010s onwards, when the growing instability in the Middle East was working in Iran's favour but to the detriment of the Gulf Cooperation Council. The GCC has been lastingly divided since 5 June 2017, when the crisis that now pits four of its member states against each other was triggered.³

Iran's growing influence is viewed as the most pressing threat by Israel and a number of GCC members, including the UAE, Bahrain and Saudi Arabia. This has created fertile ground for a rapprochement between Israel and these Gulf states. Tehran has profited from America's failures to stabilise Iraq and to turn the GCC into a multilateral regional authority capable of ensuring security in the region; it has also seized the opportunities caused in the region by the "Arab Spring" to consolidate its presence in Syria, Iraq, and, less directly, in Yemen.

During this period, the Obama administration embarked on a process of disengaging from conflicts in the Middle East. Its successor has since broadly pursued this process, whilst simultaneously going counter to the dialogue Obama had launched with Iran on its nuclear programme. On 8 May 2018, Washington withdrew from the international plan of action for Iran's nuclear programme (JCPoA), which had been signed on 14 July 2015. Since the US withdrawal from JCPoA and despite the Trump administration's subsequent policy of 'maximum pressure' on Iran, incidents in the region have multiplied.⁴

The concerns of the Abu Dhabi/Riyadh duopoly have been exacerbated by many factors, including the US disengagement from the region, the imminent American presidential elections, and tensions with Iran and Turkey, which is allied with Qatar. These worries, combined with the uncertainties linked to the US presidential elections, inspired the UAE to quickly normalise its relations with Israel; Bahrain followed in its wake.

The UAE: a sovereign decision for which it takes responsibility



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The Emirati decision to normalise relations with Israel was based on mature reflection by its strongman, Mohammed Bin Zayed (MBZ). It was driven by his desire to initiate security cooperation with Israel, especially in cyber matters, and to engage in diplomacy of influence with the White House.⁵ The latter was established by his close advisor, Yousef Al Otaiba, the UAE's ambassador to Washington since 2008. During the Qatar crisis, this influence consisted of co-financing with Saudi Arabia American public relations and communications firms that had close ties with both Israel and President Trump's inner circle.⁶ The Emirati ambassador's privileged access to Trump's son-in-law Jared Kushner helped to persuade the US president to adopt the Emirati narrative.⁷ For instance, he added the Muslim Brotherhood to the US list of terrorist organisations in April 2017.⁸

Saudi Arabia: an ambivalent position without normalisation in prospect

Saudi Arabia has set itself apart by assuming two very different positions, each backed by one of its two heads of state. While King Salman chooses to adhere to the principle of peace in exchange for the territories occupied by Israel in 1967 (which is the essence of the Arab peace plan), his heir Mohammed Bin Salman (MBS) prefers a rhetoric that is much more favourable towards Israel and more motivated by the advantages that would derive from economic and technological cooperation than by any political will to find a peaceful solution. In fact, Riyadh under the stewardship of its strongman MBS not only approved the Abraham Accords, but also vigorously encouraged Bahrain to make its normalisation with Israel official under US pressure. Having done so, Riyadh now runs the risk of losing out to the new dynamic established by Abu Dhabi, which is aiming to become the region's new leader.

Bahrain: forced normalisation

Bahrain is not in charge of its own rapprochement with Israel. While the small kingdom maintains close relations with Israel in security matters, it has always been careful not to upset its own population, which is traditionally the most politicised of the GCC states, along with Kuwait's. The normalisation of its



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relations with Israel was imposed on Bahrain following the Emirati announcement on 13 August 2020 and under joint pressure from MBS and Trump. President Trump was in a hurry to register a diplomatic success so as to erase from memory the failure of the ‘deal of the century’, driven by his son-in-law. Bahrain’s role in this normalisation is nonetheless central because it serves as a direct political channel between Saudi Arabia and Israel. Riyadh cannot go so far as to normalise its own relations with Israel⁹ without risking a domestic revolt. Bahrain, however, whose population is sensitive to the Palestinian question, has been embarrassed by the rejection of its normalisation. As soon as the step was announced, 23 political associations signed a petition to reject it – despite the fact that Bahrain’s political opposition has been stifled ever since the regime repressed the protest movement in 2011.

Bahrain has since retracted its peace declaration signed in Washington by co-signing with Israel, on 18 October 2020, a communiqué announcing the establishment of peaceful diplomatic relations (but not full peace) with Israel, in contrast with Washington’s declaration of 15 September 2020.¹⁰

Kuwait: the exception

Only Kuwait continues to resist US pressure, which has been recurrent since 1991, the year in which the emirate was liberated from the Iraqi invasion by the international coalition that arrived, led by the US, on 2 August 1990. Unlike its neighbours from the GCC, Kuwait chose a semi-democratic form of governance after adopting its Constitution on 11 November 1962. It has a dynamic and plural parliament and associations, but is limited by the lack of political parties, which are prohibited. The Palestinian question has been a key issue in the emirate ever since Yasser Arafat founded his Fatah party there in 1964; and a Palestinian community estimated at 450,000 – only a little smaller than the local Kuwaiti population – resided there until the invasion of Kuwait. Whilst the Palestinian community paid a heavy price for Arafat’s choice not to condemn this invasion by being forced into exile without hope of return, Kuwait’s ruling family, parliament, and civil society never disengaged from the Palestinian cause. The emirate never ceded to US pressure to forge relations with Israel. The death on 30 September 2020 of Sheikh Sabah Al Ahmad Al Jaber Al Sabah, who had been the emblematic



figure of openness and mediation among Kuwaiti diplomats, is unlikely to incite his successor and half-brother Sheikh Nawaf to abandon this legacy for as long as Kuwaitis are united behind the Palestinian cause.

Qatar takes a back seat; the Sultanate of Oman is weakened

Since 1996 Doha has been open about the fact that it does not consider maintaining relations with Israel to be a problem. However, Emir Tamim views normalisation from the perspective of the Arab peace plan adopted in 2002. Qatar being allied with Turkey, which has become the new archenemy of the UAE and Saudi Arabia after Iran, it cannot align itself with the Abraham Accords as they run counter to that Arab peace plan. Doha nevertheless has a useful part to play for Israel by mediating between Hamas and the Palestinian Authority, while also maintaining a regular political dialogue with Tel Aviv.

The Sultanate of Oman, on the other hand, which hosted the Israeli prime minister in Muscat in October 2018, might be persuaded to normalise with Israel. Yet Sultan Haitham, successor of the emblematic Qaboos, has little room to manoeuvre. Oman is facing a double crisis – health and economic – because of the drop in oil prices; it also has to contend with the pressure put on it by Abu Dhabi, its main trading partner in the region. Oman's primary diplomatic advantage is its role as mediator between Iran and the US – a role that is currently inoperative. Should Joe Biden be elected US president, Muscat might well return to the region's centre-stage, thus pulling the rug from under Abu Dhabi's feet, whose normalisation with Israel has no chance of delivering an Israeli-Palestinian peace.

The Abraham Accords undoubtedly mark a new departure in the region's geopolitics, not by driving forward the peace process (because they largely ignore the Palestinian issue), but by allowing Israel unprecedented access to the Arabian Peninsula and the Persian Gulf.

The UAE and Israel are already discussing investments in joint tourism and infrastructure projects, notably along the Red Sea coast at Haifa and Eilat, but also in Socotra.



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Washington views this new geopolitical axis of Israel and the Gulf states as an efficient means of neutralising Iran's influence in the region and also counts on it to put the brakes on China's progression there. Additionally, this Arab-Israeli normalization process fits with both the Republican and Democrat parties, though if Biden is confirmed victorious in the current US presidential elections then the honeymoon period with Israel that characterized relations under the Trump mandate could come to an end.

Yet the Accords are already causing numerous problems. In the long term, these might become risk factors for the Gulf state that have normalised their relations with Israel, since the Accords were concluded against the will of populations that never have any say. However, the public outcry that these normalisations have prompted in KSA, Kuwait, and Yemen (as well as in Sudan, where the prospect of a new normalisation deal has been announced) could have short-term effects on the Emirati and Bahraini decisions.



Endnotes

1. The Gulf Cooperation Council is an intergovernmental body consisting of the six monarchies of the Arabian Peninsula: Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates, Oman, Qatar, and Kuwait. It was created on 25 May 1981 at its constitutive summit in Abu Dhabi.
2. For a critical analysis of the Accords, see:
https://www.du.edu/korbel/middleeast/media/documents/occasional_paper_10.pdf
3. For details regarding the crisis that erupted on 5 June between Qatar and a quartet of states (Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain and Egypt) – which broke off diplomatic relations with Doha and above all organised an air, land, and sea embargo of Qatar – see Andreas Krieg (ed.) *Divided Gulf. The Anatomy of a Crisis*, Palgrave, Macmillan, 2019.
4. This ‘maximum pressure’ has exacerbated incidents in the Gulf of Oman, where tankers moored beyond the territorial waters of the Emirate of Fujairah (a member of the UAE) were targeted by drones in May 2019, and in the Persian Gulf where Aramco oil facilities were attacked by missiles on 14 September 2019, causing the loss of half of Saudi oil production for a fortnight. These attacks were later claimed by Houthi rebels but bear the hallmarks and know-how of Iran.
5. Ben Freeman, *The Emirati Lobby: How the UAE Wins in Washington*, Center For International Policy, Foreign Influence Transparency Initiative, October 2019. The CIP is an independent body founded in 1975, which publishes reports on US foreign policy.
6. Fatiha Dazi-Héni, “Les monarchies du Golfe: les guerres de l’information dans la crise de juin 2017”, in Céline Marangé, Maud Quessard, *Les guerres de l’information à l’ère numérique*, Paris, PUF, 2021, chapter 8.
7. Giorgio Cafiero, “Donald Trump: A Win for the UAE?”, *Lobellog*, 28 November 2016
8. Mark Hosenenball, “Trump Administration Debates Designating Muslim Brotherhood as Terrorist Group”, *Reuters*, 9 January 2017.
9. http://arabcenterdc.org/policy_analysis/saudi-arabia-prefers-implicit-normalization-with-israel/
10. <https://www.axios.com/Israel-bahrain-interim-normalization-deal-manama-a00d9866-af71-49ea82b6-939sbf3aa935.html>



About the author

Fatiha Dazi-Héni

Fatiha is a Gulf and Middle East researcher at IRSEM, lecturer at Sciences Po Lille, and author of *L'Arabie saoudite en 100 questions*, reissued by Tallandier (Paris, 2020). She is also a contributor to ARI's e-book *A Way Out of the Inferno? Rebuilding Security in Libya, Syria, Iraq and Yemen* (2017).

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arab-reform.net

contact@arab-reform.net



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