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The New Wave of Normalization: Shifting Sands or a Major Earthquake?

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UAE ambassador to Israel Mohamed Al Khaja (3-R), former foreign minister Gabi Ashkenazi (R), Tel Aviv mayor Ron Huldai (L) and Israeli president Isaac Herzog (C) push the stock market button during the opening ceremony of the new UAE embassy of the United Arab Emirates at the Tel Aviv stock market building in Tel Aviv, Israel, July 2021. © EPA-EFE/ABIR SULTAN



Introduction

The 2020 developments in the Israel-Palestine conflict – from another flare-up of violence to new forms of Palestinian mobilization and unity – have occurred at a time when the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Bahrain had begun an unprecedented official process of normalization with Israel that includes political, commercial, and cultural exchanges.

While Israel has maintained direct relations with a number of Gulf Cooperation Council member states (GCC) for more than two decades, the official normalization of relations between Israel and the UAE and Bahrain in August and September 2020 was a significant development, considering the last peace treaty with another Arab country had taken place 26 years earlier (when Israel signed the Wadi Araba accords with Jordan), and given the intensity of the Israeli and UAE efforts to display the new warmth in their relations.

When observing the accords, a year later, it has had a significant impact on the region. It has affected all paradigms from geopolitics and economics to tourism. It is also particularly reflective of the changing dynamics in the region and beyond. Whilst the broad-spectrum trend of engagement continues to be optimistic between the signatory nations, events such as the recent conflict with Hamas in the Gaza Strip raises questions about the long-term impact of the Abraham Accords.

This piece will attempt to tackle the relevance of the Abraham Accords and to discuss to what extent the normalization drive will be affected by the recent dynamics in the Israel-Palestine conflict, and notably the most recent violence.

The “Abraham Accords” as a New Shift in Regional Geopolitics

The United Arab Emirates and Bahrain joined a small group of Arab countries that are willing to display their association with Israel publicly and officially. The UAE's



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Foreign Minister Abdullah bin Zayed Al Nahyan signed the Abraham Accords with Bahrain's Foreign Minister Abdul Latif bin Rashid Al Zayani, and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu on 15 September 2020 in Washington, D.C.

Former U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo attributed the 2019 Warsaw Conference to having laid the groundwork for this path to normalization. The primary objective of the conference – co-organized by Poland and the US – was to build and strengthen a coalition to contain Iran. Amongst the delegates of the 70 states that participated were numerous Arab bureaucrats who mingled and exchanged with Israeli counterparts. The push for normalization from the perspective of the UAE was propelled by national security considerations and notably its concern with Iranian foreign policy and the UAE's ambition to oppose other emerging regional actors.

Nonetheless, the Abraham Accords go beyond security issues as they are also tied to economic ambitions. Gulf states like the UAE are keen to diversify their economies from oil and partner with Israeli institutions, particularly in technology and tourism. This can be seen with the creation of the UAE-Israel Business Council (June 2020). Similarly, the Abu Dhabi Chamber of Commerce and Industry (ADCCI) has signed an agreement with the Tel Aviv Chamber of Commerce (TACC) to develop trade cooperation in a variety of business sectors (February 2021).

The new wave of normalization witnessed a quick succession of announcements of investments, that incorporated the tourism sector, major technology deals, even attempts from the Emirates to purchase an Israeli football club.

The Abraham Accords do not endeavour to resolve the Palestinian conflict, nor were they intended to by their signatories. However, given that mainstream public opinion in the Arab world is highly critical of Israel and defends the Palestinian cause, the UAE highlighted the brand-new possibilities for peace that could arise from the process of normalization to justify the treaty. Conversing at a panel event in the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, the UAE's ambassador to the US, Yousef Al Otaiba, stated that the Abraham Accords were arranged essentially to limit Israeli annexation of the West Bank and to retain the possibility of a two-state solution. Nonetheless, as Israeli repression in the West Bank and Jerusalem intensified and the death toll in Gaza increased, there were almost no statements



from the UAE regarding the impact on Palestinians of these actions or how the Abraham Accords are meant to improve the rights of the Palestinians.

Abraham Accords and Previous Peace Treaties: A Brief Comparison

To adequately apprehend the process of normalization launched by the Abraham Accords, one must understand its context and how it differs from the previous normalizations between Israel and Arab countries. The agreements of Egypt and Jordan with Israel were mostly about ending active conflict and were founded on the idea of peace in return for Egypt and Jordan recognizing Israel's control of lands it took from Palestinians. Unlike these agreements, the Abraham Accords principally overlook the issue of Palestine entirely, as the focus is much more on regional and economic dynamics.

The previous peace deals had significant political implications and costs, particularly for Egypt which was temporarily removed from the Arab League as a result (Camp David agreements were signed in September 1978, followed by a peace treaty in March 1979), and its former president Anwar Sadat was assassinated (October 1981). In the case of the UAE and Bahrain, the countries have faced little to no repercussions on the regional or global level for their normalization process.

The principal traits of the 1979 peace treaty between Israel and Egypt were reciprocal acknowledgment, cessation of their ongoing conflict which had persisted since the 1948 Arab–Israeli War, normalization of relations, and withdrawal of Israeli troops and non-combatants from the occupied Sinai. The agreement saw Egypt – the most influential Arab country - become the first Arab state to acknowledge Israel formally. It was part of a major strategic reversal as a foe of Israel transformed from an adversary into a pacific neighbour. Nonetheless, the peace is frequently characterized as 'cold peace' where diplomatic relations are stable but there is a societal rejection by Egyptians of the normalization.

The Israel–Jordan peace treaty in 1994, also known as the Wadi Araba Treaty, was also mainly about ending the conflict between the two countries following the



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1948 Arab-Israeli War. The treaty also settled land and water conflicts, presented cooperation opportunities in tourism and trade, and bound both nations to restrict their land from being utilized as an area for military confrontations by a third nation.

In contrast to the previous agreements, the Abraham Accords are not about stopping conflict as there is no direct conflict between the signatories. Rather the trilateral agreement focuses on collective security interests driven by common regional issues such as Iran, leading the pair of Gulf nations closer to Israel for economic and strategic advantages. It will provide Israel unparalleled direct access to the Arabian Peninsula and the Gulf region and is meant to promote economic developments and collaborations on different levels. It was promoted by its architects as a building block in a 'new Middle East' that incorporates Israel. The Abrahams accords are supposed to help end the illegal occupation of Palestine, however, in practice, the accord does little in that direction.

Fear of Iran Trumps Concerns about Palestinian rights

The signatories to the Abrahams Accords approach the process of normalization as one which emulates a collective security agreement. The rapprochement was arguably done to isolate a common threat in the region, as Iran's growing presence was seen as the greatest peril by Israel and several GCC countries, including the UAE, Bahrain, and Saudi Arabia. The UAE supported former U.S. President Donald Trump's maximum pressure strategy against Iran.

The UAE ambassador to the US, Yousef al Otaiba stated that, while many commentators tried to portray the agreement to fit their specific narratives, for the UAE, it was mainly about impeding Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's provocative strategy to spread Israeli sovereignty to sizable shares of the West Bank. His argument was that by signing a peace deal with Israel, the UAE may have some leverage to convince Israel to halt its annexation.

However, the accords are ultimately more concerned about Iran than about Palestinian rights and the illegal annexation of their lands. UAE and Israel foresee



their strategic intention to restrain Iran in the region, despite any possible relations between UAE and Iran. To be explicit, UAE's decent relations with Iran is a cold temporary peace instead of a positive rapprochement.

So the Abrahams Accords ultimately appear less about peace or Palestine, but rather a step in a new direction of regional foreign policy, This can be seen vis-a-vis the process of normalization with Israel, which changes current geopolitics in the region with a new axis forming within the Gulf to confront Iran. Supported by the United States, the accords ensured a path for closer security and economic ties between the signatories without solving the Israel-Palestine conflict.

The Abraham Accords and the Test of Time: Trump's Departure and Resumption of Violence

In June 2020, about three months prior to the normalization of relations between the UAE and Israel, only 20% of Emiratis supported ties with Israel according to a poll commissioned by the Washington Institute for Near East Policy (WINEP). An updated poll conducted by WINEP in November, after the deal was signed, showed that perceptions of normalization had improved slightly but Emirati attitudes remained divided with 47% saying the accords were positive while 49% saw them in a negative light.

The latest Israeli assault on Gaza in May has cast the accords in an even more unfavourable light. For decades, there was an implicit understanding in the Arab world that normalization must not be sought until the Palestinian issue is resolved. The Israeli attacks were a stark reminder that the Accords had not improved the situation for Palestinians. However, despite the Israeli attacks, the Abraham Accords did not come under any serious or sustained critique in the signatory nations. The UAE historically has not provided an open platform to its citizen for critique or dissent; therefore, it is unlikely the populace will express dismay over the normalization process even if support for normalization remains divided.

And while critics of the Abraham Accords point to the bloodshed in Gaza and



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violent demonstrations in the occupied West Bank to confirm that the accords had no positive spillover on the Palestinian situation, this has not slowed down or affected the formation of the Israel-Gulf Cooperation Council Chamber of Commerce and Industry in the UAE. The UAE sovereign wealth fund recently approved a memorandum of understanding to purchase an Israeli natural gas field for \$1.1bn USD.

It is clear that business will take precedence over support or concern for Palestinian rights and well-being as the UAE prioritizes bilateral trade deals with Israel.

Conclusion

The notion of normalization with Israel is often promoted based on the basis that it will bring prosperity, stability, and economic development to those who engage in it and have a positive spillover for the region. However, in the case of normalization with Egypt and Jordan, the expected prosperity did not materialize. And it is unlikely that such prosperity will follow the Abraham Accords, whose ultimate objectives are to facilitate bilateral relations and provide a collective security approach to confront Iran.

Nonetheless, developments that have occurred in the Middle East in the last decade have driven some countries to reconsider their national security priorities, which worked as a catalyst for normalization and establishing relationships between these nations and the State of Israel. Anwar Gargash, the UAE's Minister of State for Foreign Affairs, stated that Iran's belligerent regional activities forced them to contemplate a relationship with Israel "with fresh eyes." The Abraham Accords' most enduring feature in the Gulf may then be geopolitical by creating a new bloc premised on the fact that most of the Gulf regimes and Israel share an identical position that seeks to contain the perceived Iranian threat to the region. After all, the accords create a shift in the region's geopolitics by disregarding the peace process and providing Israel unparalleled access to the Arabian Peninsula and the Gulf. This new axis also has the support of the United States which considers this brand-new geopolitical axis of Israel and the Gulf nations as an effective method of countering Iran's power in the region. This contrasts with the



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“cold peace” that developed with Egypt and Jordan which strengthened diplomatic ties but did not lead to any new axis. The very fact of the arrangement demonstrates that the UAE is placing its national interests ahead of solidarity with the plight of the Palestinian people.

This leaves the question of whether other Gulf countries will join the normalization bandwagon now that Trump has left power. For now, it appears that other Gulf countries are expected to wait for a political resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict prior to pursuing similar steps taken by the UAE and Bahrain. Saudi Arabia continues to support the Palestinians’ stances on fundamental matters. Meanwhile, Kuwait and Qatar maintain their opposition to the idea of unilateral Israeli annexation of areas in the West Bank, noting that it is contradictory to the Palestinian cause and international law.



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