

The Abraham Accords: A Historic Breakthrough or an Act of Treachery?

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Why did the normalisation deal take place now? How does each party to the agreement benefit? What are the options available to the Palestinian leadership? This policy outlook aims to address these questions and argues that the fundamental change that has resulted is that a united Arab front which ostensibly defended Palestinian interests no longer exists, instead there are individual Arab states that are pursuing their national interests, leaving the Palestinians to fend for themselves.



On August 13, 2020, a normalisation deal between Israel and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) made headlines. With this breaking news, the UAE became the third Arab country after [Egypt in 1979](#) and [Jordan in 1994](#) to sign agreements with Israel. Officially named as the [Abraham Accords](#), the deal was brokered by the United States (U.S) President Donald Trump. At a press conference following the announcement, the President [said](#) this “is a significant step towards building a more peaceful, secure and prosperous Middle East” and added that he expects “more Arab and Muslim countries will follow the United Arab Emirates’ lead.”

The major achievement of the deal was presented as Israel’s agreement to suspend its proposed annexation plan of the occupied West Bank. However, it quickly became apparent that the parties’ [understandings of the suspension](#) differed. [According to](#) Yousef Al-Otaiba, the UAE’s ambassador to Washington, “the agreement immediately stops annexation and the potential for violent escalation. It maintains the viability of a two-state solution as endorsed by the Arab League and international community”. On the contrary, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu was clear that he has been merely [delaying the annexation](#), stating: “there is no change to my plan to extend sovereignty, our sovereignty in Judea and Samaria, in full coordination with the United States”. Besides the discrepancy regarding annexation, the agreement also left the Palestinian-Israeli conflict untouched, an issue that had always been the focal point of contention between the Arab states and Israel.

While Israel and UAE’s thinly veiled clandestine relationship has been known for years, after the normalisation deal both countries are now expected to publicly enhance their cooperation in several fields ranging from investments, technology, security, energy, education, healthcare and others along with the establishment of formal diplomatic ties. That brings several questions to mind. Why did the deal take place now? Is this move a historic breakthrough or a betrayal? How does each party to the agreement, namely the US, the UAE and Israel, benefit? What are the options available for the Palestinian leadership? While this paper aims to address these questions, it argues that the fundamental change which was marked by this deal is that a united Arab front which ostensibly defended Palestinian interests no longer exists, instead there are individual Arab states that are pursuing their national interests, leaving the Palestinians to fend for themselves.

Background

Throughout the 1970s and 80s, the posture of the Gulf states towards Israel was essentially confrontational in accordance with what was understood to be the Arab consensus. While support for the Palestinian issue was a frequent theme in the speeches of the Gulf leaders, despite their geographical remoteness these states were also ac-

tively engaged in championing the cause by taking concrete steps such as participating in the oil embargo after the 1973 Arab-Israeli war, joining of the [Arab League boycott of Israel](#), providing [development aid](#) to the ‘front-line states’ of those bordering Israel and Palestine like Jordan, Lebanon and Syria and [financially assisting](#) the Palestinian Liberation Organisation (PLO) to the tune of billions of dollars.

This antagonistic approach towards Israel began to be re-evaluated after Iraq invaded Kuwait in 1990 and the subsequent US-led Gulf War. These two events had a dramatic impact on the [Gulf states’ perception of regional security](#), which not only revealed their vulnerability and the need for outside allies for protection but also resulted in the re-assessment of viewing Israel as an imminent threat. In this light, for the Gulf leadership resolving the Palestinian-Israeli conflict became an even more important milestone in bringing stability to the region and it was seen as a means to ensure getting protection and support from the U.S.

It was in this political landscape that the Gulf states took part in the 1991 Madrid Conference on Arab-Israeli peace. While this marked the beginning of the early diplomatic contacts between Gulf officials and their Israeli counterparts, with time open hostility evolved into mostly covert relations. The decision taken by the Gulf states to end their [blacklisting](#) of companies with economic ties to Israel following the 1993 Oslo Accords represented one of the primary examples of these changing paradigms. While trade relations had been the basis of initial contacts, with Oman and Qatar allowing Israel to open trade offices in their countries, efforts to establish diplomatic ties were also been evident as both states [hosted successive Israeli Prime Ministers](#).

Arguably the boldest change in this regard had been the [Arab Peace Initiative](#) (a preliminary version was the [Fahd Plan](#)) spearheaded by Saudi Arabia. Unanimously accepted by all Arab League states in 2002, the initiative offered Israel normalisation on the condition of its withdrawal from the occupied territories to the pre-1967 borders along with Israel’s acceptance of an independent Palestinian state with East Jerusalem as its capital. Denoting a significant break with the past, this was the first time that the Arab states were collectively willing to recognise Israel and establish open ties with their old nemesis. Despite failing to yield any results, the goals set by the initiative became the [backbone of all other subsequent negotiations](#).

Changing geopolitical faultlines

The whole political landscape of the region was reconfigured in the wake of the 2003 US invasion of Iraq and the toppling of Saddam Hussein. This became Iran’s moment to [assert its influence](#) in the country and to challenge the

American presence in the region. Over the years, Iran further pursued its quest for regional hegemony in several other states including Afghanistan, Lebanon, Syria and Yemen through employing a [mixture of hard and soft power strategies](#).

Mutual concerns about rising Iranian power and a growing perception of the Islamic Republic as a key threat to the stability and the security of the region brought Israel and the Gulf states, mainly Saudi Arabia and the UAE, closer. Even though the US remains a political heavyweight in the region, what by all accounts is a [gradual withdrawal](#) from the Middle East beyond simply [pulling back troops from Iraq and Afghanistan](#) and its reluctance to engage in a direct military confrontation with Iran despite an ongoing [standoff](#) have further cemented the idea of the necessity of reinforcing this relationship. That being said, UAE's stance vis-à-vis Iran has been based on a rather pragmatist line. For example, while the UAE had been fighting against the Iran-backed Houthi rebels in Yemen alongside Saudi Arabia, recently it has announced a partial military [withdrawal](#) amid a rift with its ally. Moreover, the country has also been [circumventing the US imposed sanctions](#) on Iran by allowing the export of Iranian oil through its ports.

Besides Iranian ascendance, another incident that irrevocably changed the status quo and altered the regional power distribution was the Arab Uprisings of 2011. From the beginning, the Gulf states were divided into two camps in their approach towards the upheavals. While the Qatari leadership has been [supportive of democratic transitions](#) across the region, the Saudi-Emirati alliance has been hostile towards all popular, and particularly the Islamist, movements seeing them as existential threats. Thus, in an attempt to prevent the emergence of a possible new regional order, a collective Saudi and Emirati strategy has been based on the goal of curbing these movements both

within and outside their borders. Internally, this policy has been translated into persecution of opposition figures such as those belonging to [Al-Islah](#), an offshoot of the Muslim Brotherhood in the UAE. Externally, it took shape as interventions in the domestic affairs of various states either by military force, such as in Libya through [arming renegade General Khalifa Haftar](#) against the internationally recognised government or by financially through backing authoritarian regimes with billions of dollars, such as it has been in [the case of Egyptian President Abdel-Fattah Al-Sisi](#) who overthrew the first democratically elected President of the country in a military coup. Within this framework, yet again Israel has been seen as a viable partner which could provide these monarchs with [security and surveillance technologies](#) in a bid to control and suppress dissidents and also due to their shared enmity towards Islamist movements.

The United Arab Emirates: when you have friends like these

The UAE and Israel have long been moving towards normalisation. Besides their common security concerns - a mutual distrust for Iran and hostility towards Islamist movements embodied most notably in the Muslim Brotherhood - relations have also developed in several other fields. Most recently, Israel was permitted to open a [diplomatic office](#) as a part of International Renewable Energy Agency in the Emirati capital of Abu Dhabi, [Israeli ministers made official visits](#) to the UAE, [Israeli athletes competed](#) in the international tournaments hosted by the country and Israel was [invited to take part in the Dubai Expo 2020](#).



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 on September 15, 2020. (The White House / Shealah Craighead - Anadolu Agency)

The official Emirati narrative as to why the UAE signed a normalisation agreement with Israel now has been that the country was acting on behalf of Palestinians preconditioning Israel to abandon its annexation plans. However, this reasoning has been met with both scepticism and criticism. One of the central arguments in this regard has been that Palestinians were neither informed nor consulted about the deal. Moreover, Netanyahu's statements that he is committed to eventually implementing annexation has shown that, contrary to its claims, the UAE achieved nothing tangible for Palestinians. Elaborating on this matter to TRT World Research Centre, Baker Institute fellow for the Middle East Dr. Kristian Coates Ulrichsen said that "It was striking that Mohammed bin Zayed claimed that the normalisation agreement meant that annexation had been stopped, going further than the Israelis, who talked only of a suspension, and that has been the Emirati talking point ever since. However, the final text of the Abraham Accord that was released after the White House signing ceremony made no mention whatsoever to annexation".

Another point of contention relates to the presentation of the deal as a peace agreement. While Egypt and Jordan signed peace deals with Israel after having fought wars, they both secured concrete gains such as the Israeli retreatment from the Sinai Peninsula. Additionally, in both cases, the Palestinian plight had been a central part of the agreements and diplomatic ties with Israel had been based on security relations. However, the UAE was neither engaged in any armed conflict with Israel to qualify the agreement as a peace deal nor was focused only on security concerns but rather on deepening and normalising relations.

On top of all this, the UAE has been accused of having compromised the Arab consensus on the Palestinian issue and the principle of 'land for peace' by effectively indicating that it will not do anything to reverse the Israeli occupation. Given that this understanding was already implied in an [article penned for an Israeli newspaper](#) ahead of the deal by Al-Otaiba who was urging Israel to choose between normalisation or annexation but failing to mention ending the occupation, the move was unsurprising for many. Speaking to TRT World Research Centre Dr. Andreas Krieg, a lecturer at the School of Security Studies at King's College London, argued that "For Abu Dhabi, unlike Dubai and other northern Emirates, the Palestinian cause is not a pressure point where they need to fear any public pushback. For political elites in Abu Dhabi, the Palestinian cause is an issue of a bygone era, which they can ignore to advance Emirati national interests".

Within this framework, if stopping the annexation was used only as a justification for normalisation, why did the UAE opt to publicise its relations with Israel at this given time? According to Dr. Krieg, "For the UAE this is a mere formalisation of already existing relations at a time when the Trump administration asked its Gulf allies to provide them

with a foreign policy win ahead of US Presidential Elections. The UAE has provided Trump with a foreign policy victory in exchange for more sophisticated military hardware being sold to the Emirates. It also provides the UAE with more freedom to manoeuvre in other conflict theatres such as Libya, where Abu Dhabi is at times at odds with the American strategy". In other words, the UAE's prime motivation for formalising relations with Israel now has been based securing vital leverage by both having the US and Israel on its side, at least tacitly, along with seeking a comparative military advantage mainly through [buying F-35 fighter jets and advanced armed drones](#) on the road to achieving its regional ambitions.

Indeed, since the Arab uprisings of 2011, the UAE has been striving to impose its particular vision across the Middle East. This assertive policy, as mentioned earlier, has been based on [two pillars](#): curbing Iranian expansion and supporting counter-revolutionary movements to maintain the status quo in its favour, putting the UAE at odds with both Qatar and Turkey who have supported pro-democracy movements throughout the region. In this regard, pointing out the main point of current contention, Dr. Krieg argued that "The UAE sees Turkey as the most important geostrategic competitor in the region for both geostrategic interests and in regard to the ideational project that Abu Dhabi is pursuing in the wider region". He further stated that "Even the Gulf spat with Qatar is just a side-show to what is an essential confrontation with Turkey in the Horn of Africa, in Libya, in Syria and Iraq. The Turkish project post-Arab Spring has been perceived as the main point of contention for the Emirati project". However, despite the expectations of the UAE, for both the US and Israel, Turkey remains as an indispensable strategic partner in the region just as Qatar is.

The Palestinian predicament: challenges and opportunities

The normalisation deal was, as expected, dismissed unanimously by all the parties across the Palestinian political spectrum. In this regard, while Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas [denounced the deal](#) calling it "a betrayal of Jerusalem, Al-Aqsa and the Palestinian cause", Hamas [described](#) it as "a blatant assault" and "a treacherous stab in the back of Palestinian people". In an official statement, the Palestinian Authority further [expressed its rejection](#) by reiterating that "neither the Emirates nor any other party has the right to speak on behalf of the Palestinian people. The Palestinian leadership shall allow nobody to interfere in the Palestinian affairs or decide on their behalf regarding their legitimate rights in their homeland".



People protest against United Arab Emirates' (UAE) and Bahrain's deal to normalise ties with Israel at Manarah Square in Ramallah, West Bank on September 15, 2020. Hundreds took part in the demonstration. (Issam Rimawi - Anadolu Agency)

In response, the Palestinian leadership demanded the UAE's withdrawal from the agreement, instantly recalled the Palestinian ambassador from Abu Dhabi and urged the Arab League to hold an emergency meeting on the matter, counting on a unified Arab position which would make sure that no other country would follow the UAE's lead. However, to the Palestinians' dismay, the Arab League [voted down](#) the draft resolution condemning the UAE-Israel deal. During his speech, the Secretary-General of the Arab League [affirmed](#) that Arab states are in consensus on their commitment to the Palestinian cause but also added that every country has a "sovereign and indisputable right" to formulate and implement its own foreign policy decisions, breaking with historical precedent. On top of this disappointment, in an unprecedented move, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) has also [demanded an apology](#) from the Palestinian leaders for their remarks criticising the deal.

This move marked a watershed movement in the Palestinian struggle. For years, the Palestinians' most important leverage in the conflict who have been disadvantaged in many fronts in comparison to Israel has been Arab unity. However, this deal proved that national interests override historic solidarity with the Palestinian cause. It appears as though some Arab states have reached a stage where the Palestinian issue is no longer the defining feature of the re-

gion's problems. Even though Arab states did not take any tangible steps to end the occupation, Israel was arguably restrained to some extent knowing that in order to be accepted in the region it had to make peace with the Palestinians.

Yet some Arab regimes blame Palestinians for being [the cause of their own suffering](#) by rejecting consecutive peace proposals. The normalisation deal shows that the UAE shares a similar outlook in this regard. Expanding on this point, Dr. Krieg argued that "Abu Dhabi has blamed much of the stalemate in the Arab-Israeli conflict on the Palestinian leadership rather than Israel. Thereby, Abu Dhabi has relegated the Arab-Israeli conflict into an internal Israel-Palestinian conflict". It can be argued that by claiming that Palestinians are the reason behind the failure of negotiations, Arab states have relinquished their responsibility for the Palestinian cause.

In this atmosphere, many have claimed that the real losers of this deal are the Palestinians. However, there are several options available to the Palestinian leadership to navigate through this new phase. For one, this challenge obligates the Palestinian leadership to rethink their strategies that have so far but failed to alter the status quo. For example, it provides a strong incentive to end the ongoing [division between Fatah and Hamas](#) that has paralysed Palestinian pol-



People holding banners while marching, being stopped by police as they gather to protest against Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, demanding his resignation over corruption cases and his failure to combat the Covid-19 Pandemic in Tel Aviv, Israel on October 03, 2020. (Mostafa Alkharouf - Anadolu Agency)

itics since 2007. There is already momentum in this regard, as for the first time in almost a decade [Palestinian factions met](#) in Turkey to discuss a unified national strategy to face the normalisation deal, to reach a rapprochement and to hold elections.

This could also serve as a catalyst for Palestinians to look inwards rather than trying to find answers elsewhere. In this regard, funding is a serious concern. According to the Palestinian Finance Ministry, the PA has not [received any funding](#) from its Arab counterparts for months, resulting in an almost 70 per cent decline in revenues. A drop in foreign aid puts the Palestinian Authority in a very difficult place, falling short of covering monthly public expenditures and pushes it to search for alternative sources of funding. Moreover, the Palestinian leadership may have to search for and formulate alternative governance mechanisms, which are currently linked on almost every level to Israel in line with the structures set up after the 1993 Oslo Accords. In fact in May, as a response to Netanyahu's annexation drive, the Palestinian Authority announced that they would no longer be [bound by any of the agreements with Israel](#) including security coordination. However, in the absence of a well-thought-out governance strategy, rather than pressuring Israel to take responsibility as the occupying power, it leaves ordinary Palestinians in a difficult situation due to civic complications such as the need for Palestinian patients to seek Israeli permits for medical treatment. Finally, rather than insisting on a moribund two-state solution, they could opt to campaign for [one inclusive democratic state](#) with equal rights.

Trump and Netanyahu: scoring points domestically

In reality, the major winners of the deal are Trump and Netanyahu. For Trump, the timing of the agreement only weeks before the election provides him with a historic foreign policy achievement. Moreover, it saves Trump from the annexation dilemma, at least for the time being, which unfolded largely as a result of his [Middle East Peace Plan](#). Discussing the impact of the agreement, Dr. Ulrichsen stated that "the Abraham Accords has been welcomed by political figures from across the aisle in Washington and it gives the Trump administration a 'win' ahead of the election, but it also has been welcomed by Democrats who could become more powerful in Congress, if they can win the Senate, and take the White House if Joe Biden becomes President". He added that "it, therefore, has been a smart move politically for the UAE to give Trump a deal he can claim credit for while also acting to neutralise a Congress that might otherwise have been more potentially hostile toward the UAE over Yemen and human rights issues as well as Libya".

However, while the UAE seems to have secured its position in the US, it is yet to be seen whether the agreement will help mobilise support for Trump who is currently behind the Democratic Party nominee Joe Biden according to the [polls](#). While the deal will certainly help Trump to consol-

idate the support of Evangelicals and right-wing Jewish Americans, how much a normalisation deal between Israel and Arab states will resonate in the broader American public remains an open question. Domestically, there are various problems Trump is facing severe criticisms for. His mismanagement of the coronavirus pandemic is at the top of these concerns. Currently, the [death toll](#) in the country has surpassed 200,000 people which only continues to increase at an alarming rate suggesting that the worst is yet to come. There is also an [ongoing economic crisis](#) that does not seem to be recovering any time soon. In addition to these, there is the issue of systemic racism and inequalities in America, which has been embodied in the [Black Lives Matters](#) protests. These are the real problems which affect people's day to day lives and rather than foreign policy victories these will be the decisive factors in Americans' minds when they go to the polls.

Likewise, Netanyahu also needs all the help he can get as he is grappling with a number of urgent challenges. The country's economy is in its worse state in decades as its GDP [has plunged](#) up to 30 per cent and almost half a million Israelis remain [jobless](#). Moreover, amid the introduction of a [second lockdown](#) due to soaring numbers of people infected with Covid-19, [protests](#) against Netanyahu continue unabated, calling on him to resign over his mis-handling of the coronavirus crisis and [corruption charges](#). In this political atmosphere, recent [polls show](#) that Netanyahu's popularity ratings among Israelis have declined with 60 per cent disapproving of his coronavirus policies. The same surveys indicate a rise in support for a rival right-wing politician, [Naftali Bennett and his party](#).

For Netanyahu, a normalisation deal with the UAE puts him back in an unrivalled position by giving him a historic victory that has demonstrated that Israel does not need to have peace with the Palestinians to establish ties with its Arab counterparts. Netanyahu has been very bold in this regard [saying](#) "I think Arab countries are coming around to see that they can't be held hostage by the Palestinians. They have their own interests to develop peace with Israel, to exchange technology, to exchange things like the coronavirus vaccine development". The deal presents a far better opportunity for Netanyahu to ensure his political survival and to increase his support among right-wing voters while cementing his standing within his political base in exchange for temporarily suspending annexation, which carries with it significant [political risks](#).

Conclusion

On 15th of September, UAE and Bahrain signed an agreement to normalise their relations with Israel in a ceremony held at the White House. While Israel has pledged to suspend the annexation of the occupied West Bank in exchange for normalisation, the agreement failed to advance a resolution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. In this context, Bahrain's decision to follow the lead of the UAE has

been particularly significant and symbolic indicating that Saudi Arabia is sympathetic to normalisation given that the country acts in accordance with Saudi Arabia in its foreign policy matters. Looking at it from the other side, for Israel, Bahrain has been a notable stop on the road to [establishing ties with the key Arab player Saudi Arabia](#) which seems to be the ultimate target. At this moment, the Saudis arguably cannot afford to take an open step towards Israel due to its position as the custodian of the Holy cities and its claims to the leadership of the Islamic world. However, under these circumstances, Bahrain still could potentially serve as an indirect channel to establish ties.

While the deal has [divided the Middle East](#), with many states such [Morocco](#), [Kuwait](#), [Algeria](#), Iran and Turkey expressing criticism, some states as Oman, Sudan and Egypt welcomed the development, yet as mentioned, some chose to remain silent like Saudi Arabia. All in all, certainly, the deal has marked a turning point in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The Palestinian issue no longer a major concern in many Arab capitals beyond domestic implications. With this, Palestinians are facing the fact that they can no longer count on Arab support that was once assumed to be an unshakable norm.