



UAE-ISRAEL RAPPROCHEMENT: IMPLICATIONS FOR THE REGION

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(Views expressed in the brief are those of the author, and do not represent those of ISSI)



On August 13, 2020, Israel and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) signed a peace agreement called the 'Abraham Accord', brokered by the US administration.¹ US President Donald Trump announced that the pact for 'normalization' of ties between the two countries will encompass broader cooperation in the trade, tourism, food security, technology and energy. This makes UAE the first Gulf state and the third Arab country to develop 'normal' diplomatic relations with Israel after Egypt and Jordan's peace agreements of 1979 and 1994 respectively.

The surprise announcement came after months of talks through a mediator, Jared Kushner, senior advisor and son-in-law of President Trump.² Creating severe backlash from the Palestinians, the move also angered several Muslim states across the globe that have denounced the state of Israel over its illegal occupation of the Palestinian territory.

Statement from Prince Mohammed bin Zayed of UAE after the announcement emphasized that future annexation of the Palestinian land by Israel will be suspended as a major feature of the agreement. It read, "During a call with President Trump and Prime Minister Netanyahu, an agreement was reached to stop further Israeli annexation of Palestinian territories," he wrote. "The UAE and Israel also agreed to cooperation and setting a roadmap towards establishing a bilateral

¹ Peter Baker, Isabel Kershner, David D. Kirkpatrick and Ronen Bergman, "Israel and United Arab Emirates Strike Major Diplomatic Agreement", *The New York Times*, August 13, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/08/13/us/politics/trump-israel-united-arab-emirates-uae.html>

² Ibid.

relationship.”³ The two sides have also agreed to open reciprocal embassies and to initiate direct flights.⁴

Earlier in June, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu had indicated toward establishment of ties with UAE, particularly in terms of cooperation over the Covid crisis. However, the UAE officials watered down the claim, describing it as collaboration between private Emirati and Israeli companies.⁵ This hesitation at part of the Emirates was probably due to Israel’s announcement to annex all Palestinian territories by July which would have thrown a spanner in the works. However, the last week’s announcement of rapprochement between the two sides came after reassurances that Israel would ‘suspend’ the annexation.

How the world has reacted?

Predictably, the move has garnered severe backlash from several Muslim countries particularly Iran and Turkey. This development accentuates the internal fissures of the Muslim world where Gulf and Arab states are becoming increasingly wary of Iran’s regional posture and are perhaps making unlikely alliances against a commonly perceived enemy which is Iran. Establishing a robust relationship with Israel which is perceived as an existential threat to Iran and vice versa indicates the deep level of mistrust and antagonism between Iran and UAE.

Iran has called the move a 'strategic stupidity', while Turkey called it a 'betrayal' of the Palestinian cause. Breaking several days of silence, Saudi Arabia has also stated that it will not follow the UAE in establishing diplomatic ties with Israel until it signs an internationally recognized peace accord with the Palestinians.⁶

The European Union (EU) foreign policy spokeswoman, Nabila Massrali welcomed the move while emphasizing that the EU has always supported the two-state solution to the Palestinian conflict.⁷ Not surprisingly, the most harsh reaction came from Palestine where President Mahmoud Abbas

³ <https://twitter.com/MohamedBinZayed/status/1293925353560461312>

⁴ News Desk, “Israel, UAE to establish full diplomatic ties in groundbreaking deal”, *DW*, August 13, 2020. <https://www.dw.com/en/israel-uae-diplomatic-ties/a-54558201>

⁵ Ronen Bergman and Ben Hubbard, “Israel Announces Partnership With U.A.E., Which Throws Cold Water On It”, *The New York Times*, June 25, 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/25/world/middleeast/israel-united-arab-emirates-coronavirus.html?action=click&module=RelatedLinks&pgtype=Article>

⁶ News Desk, “Saudi Arabia says no Israel deal without Palestinian peace”, *Dawn*, August 19, 2020. <https://www.dawn.com/news/1575287>

⁷ Mariana Baabar, “Muslim world split on Israel-UAE pact: Turkey, Iran furious Pakistan cautious, all eyes on Saudi Arabia”, *The News*, August 15, 2020. <https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/700562-muslim-world-split-on-israel-uae-pact-turkey-iran-furious-pakistan-cautious-all-eyes-on-saudi-arabia>

rejected the accord outright. His adviser's statement read, "The deal is a betrayal of Jerusalem, Al-Aqsa and the Palestinian cause."⁸

Why the peace deal?

Having cold-shouldered its previous overtures for establishing bilateral relations, the United Arab Emirates has now taken a step toward building a close and important relationship with Israel. This bold move while being slandered all over the Muslim world, has been defended by the Emirates as a strategy to create 'more opportunities for peace' and 'badly needed realism'.⁹ UAE's Minister of State for Foreign Affairs, Anwar Gargash said, "While the peace decision remains basically a Palestinian-Israeli one, the bold initiative of Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed has allowed, by banishing the spectre of annexing Palestinian lands, more time for peace opportunities through the two-state solution".¹⁰

Pausing the annexation of the Jordan Valley and the West Bank settlements for a while has been promoted as the major gain of this peace agreement. While PM Netanyahu made it clear soon after the agreement that annexation is merely in suspension and not completely off the table.¹¹ If annexation is to continue sometime later, then why was this peace deal brokered in the first place? There are quite a few factors and actors at play behind this deal:

- This 'Abraham Accord' as an offspring of Trump's 'Deal of the century' comes at a crucial time for his presidential campaign as his approval rating was sinking below 50% mark.¹²
- Trump's handling of the corona virus pandemic at home and maximum pressure campaign to bend Iran have fallen flat which has put his re-election to the oval office in serious danger.
- The deal also comes as a boon to Prime Minister Netanyahu who is facing corruption charges at home and the country has seen three inconclusive elections this year.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ News Desk, "Repercussions of UAE-Israel deal on Palestine dispute", *MM News*, August 15, 2020, <https://mmnews.tv/repercussions-of-uae-israel-deal-on-palestine-dispute/>

¹⁰ News Desk, "How the world reacted to UAE, Israel normalising diplomatic ties", *Al Jazeera*, August 15, 2020, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/08/world-reacted-uae-israel-normalising-diplomatic-ties-200813152921879.html>

¹¹ Mohamad Ali Harissi "UAE defends Israel deal as 'shake-up' of tired Mideast diplomacy", *The Times of Israel*, August 14, 2020, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/uae-defends-israel-deal-as-shake-up-of-tired-mideast-diplomacy/>

¹² Jeffery M. Jones, "Trump Job Approval 42%; Below 50% on Seven Key Issues", *Gallup*, August 17, 2020. <https://news.gallup.com/poll/317477/trump-job-approval-below-seven-key-issues.aspx>

- Apart from pulling two world leaders out of their domestic political quagmires, the deal in fact is a formalization of an existing cooperation between Israel and UAE which was not the best kept secret to begin with.
- Many say that the deal is more about limiting Iran's regional foothold than it is about the cause of Palestine but it can be perceived as fulfilling both purposes simultaneously.

UAE's regional and global outreach combined with its economic progress and technological advancement has been a fruit of realistic foreign policy decisions. This deal is also a result of pragmatic ambitions. However, as far as its claims to protect the Palestinian cause are concerned, that still remains to be seen. Many across the Muslim world are concerned that this decision will encourage other Muslim countries to do the same while the usurpation of Palestinian rights will continue. This deal may have been forged in hope of resolving the longstanding Palestinian conflict and bringing peace to this region, but there are still anxious reports emanating from the Gaza Strip and the West Bank which are hard to ignore. Peace for all and pragmatism may have been at the center of this accord but on the other hand, attacks on Gaza continue for the seventh straight night as Israeli warplanes strike ground infrastructures.¹³

Pakistan's stance on the issue is clear from what Prime Minister Imran Khan said in a recent interview, "Our stance is very clear...it was cleared by Quaid-e-Azam in 1948 that we can't accept Israel until Palestinians are given their rights."¹⁴ Pakistan along with the rest of the Muslim world hopes for long term peace and prosperity for the Palestinian people as emphasized in the statement by the spokesperson at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Pakistan has an abiding commitment to the full realization of the legitimate rights of the Palestinian people, including the right to self-determination. Peace and stability in the Middle East region is also Pakistan's key priority. For a just, comprehensive and lasting peace, Pakistan has consistently supported a two-state solution in accordance with the relevant UN and OIC resolutions as well as international law. Pakistan's approach will be guided by our evaluation of how Palestinians' rights and aspirations are upheld and how regional peace, security and stability are preserved."¹⁵ Whether this deal can make this happen, is something only time will tell?.

¹³ News Desk, "Israeli planes bomb Gaza for seventh straight night", *Al Jazeera*, August 18, 2020. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/08/israeli-planes-target-gaza-seventh-straight-night-200818060902391.html>

¹⁴ News Desk, "Pakistan can't accept Israel: PM Imran Khan", *SAMAA TV*, August 19, 2020, <https://www.samaa.tv/global/2020/08/pakistan-cant-accept-israel-pm-imran-khan/>

¹⁵ <http://mofa.gov.pk/press-release-325/>