



كلية الآداب والعلوم
College of Arts and Sciences
QATAR UNIVERSITY جامعة قطر

مركز دراسات الخليج
Gulf Studies Center

**The UAE-Israel Normalisation
“If you can’t convince them, confuse them”
Mahjoob Zweiri**

**Gulf Insights Series
Nº 35 – August 2020**

The UAE-Israel Normalisation

“If you can’t convince them, confuse them”

Mahjoob Zweiri

Introduction

What was a secret marriage is now publicly announced to the world, as a strong relationship between the UAE and Israel, which has been normalized through the media on August 13, 2020. The UAE became the third Arab state – after Egypt and Jordan – and the first Gulf state to announce active ties with Israel, after both countries agreed to sign agreements to work towards a full normalisation of relations. The Israel-UAE agreement, or the Abraham Accords, was brokered and announced by the United States President, Donald Trump, who called it a "huge breakthrough". It includes Israel's approval to suspend annexation plans of the Palestinian territories in the occupied West Bank, i.e. over areas outlined in Trump's Vision for Peace. The agreement further states that it will advance peace in the Middle East region. The UAE ambassador to the US, Yousef Al Otaiba, released a statement calling the agreement "a win for diplomacy and for the region". Both countries are expected to start exchanging embassies and ambassadors and begin cooperation on a range of areas such as tourism, education, healthcare, trade, and security.

In 2015, UAE granted Israel permission to establish a diplomatic office in Abu Dhabi. In October 2018, Israel's culture and sports minister, Miri Regev, made the first official visit by an Israeli official to Abu Dhabi's Sheikh Zayed Grand Mosque. During her trip,

Israel's national anthem was played in the international judo tournament held in the capital. Shortly after, Ayoub Kara, Israel's communications minister, visited Dubai for a telecommunications conference. On December 17, 2019, and as part of Trump administration's effort to encourage normalization of relations between Israel and the Arabs, the US hosted a secret trilateral meeting between Israel and the UAE to coordinate against Iran, where a nonaggression pact was discussed as an interim step toward full diplomatic relations. Following the US-led "anti-Iran" conference that took place in Warsaw in February 2019, a trilateral forum was conducted between the US, Israel, and the UAE to strengthen cooperation against Iran, with a minimum place afterwards in 2019. On February 23, 2020, an Israeli cycling team raced through Dubai. Finally, both UAE and Israel have been cooperating to conduct research and collaborating in medical projects related to the COVID-19 pandemic. Thus, the UAE-Israeli relationships have witnessed a gradual covert progression, until normalisation was ultimately announced.

A critical question comes to mind, who was the mediator of the UAE- Israeli peace Treaty? An Israeli channel revealed that the Israeli-American businessman Haim Saban paved the way for the establishment of a relationship between the UAE and Israel in a meeting held two years back, and is currently playing a similar role with Saudi Arabia as well. Since that meeting, Saban resumed his

relations with the UAE via the latter's ambassador to Washington, Yousef Al Otaiba, when the Otaiba published, two months ago, an article in the Israeli newspaper "Yedioth Ahronoth" addressing common interests between Abu Dhabi and Tel Aviv, and a possibility of cooperation between the two countries. Saban advised Al Otaiba that the article be in Hebrew and published in a large Israeli media platform.

Hence, relations were secretly developing, its dynamics were already growing, and the normalization announcement merely informed the public. The deal was indeed the product of lengthy collaborations between Israel, UAE, and the US that would pave the way for similar agreements with Gulf neighbours. However, one can say that the UAE was aiming to prepare the public to normalisation through utilising media to introduce the "good" Israel or the history shared with the Jews. For example, the Saudi-owned MBC group had broadcasted during the Holy month of Ramadan 2020, the Emirati-produced TV-series "Um Haroon", which is a Kuwaiti drama series starring Hayat Al-Fahd and other actors, that portrays the relations between the Muslim/Christian and Jewish communities around 1948 within an unnamed Gulf country. The series has sparked widespread controversy and was accused of normalisation. This was not the first soft power tool to be used, as normalisation periphrases were repeatedly embodied in other Gulf TV-series such as "Selfie" and "makhrāj-7", starring mainly the Saudi actor Nasser Al-Qasabi. The million-dollar question remains, what is the incentive behind this friendship? The UAE does

not share borders with Israel, there was never political disputes between them, nor are they politically or economically relying on them. Then, why would a country such as the UAE pursue this controversial agreement? Why would it offer normalised relationships in return for Israel pausing annexation of Palestinian lands? How far can this be maintained? Palestinians were not approached in any way at this agreement, so in what sense does the UAE claims its commitment to stop Israel from annexing lands?

It can be argued that the Israel-UAE agreement has nothing to do with resolving the Palestine-Israel conflict, the Palestinian land annexation, or achieving peace in the Middle East. Yet, it is a half-time show in light of the escalating events in the world. To better understand what the UAE-Israel agreement is about, it should be situated in the context of these events.

The Normalisation Treaty as a Break

"If you can't convince them, confuse them". Perhaps, the UAE by taking such a step is just adding confusion to the ongoing confusion. In fact, the timing of the agreement is important. There is a fear of regional uncertainty considering various crises occurring, such as the global spread of COVID-19 and the consequent economic crisis, the Beirut explosion, the ongoing war in Yemen, and the US role in the region. The UAE-Israel agreement comes as a move towards calming down the players enrolled in all these crises and giving them a break to resuscitate.

As a matter of fact, the agreement offers Netanyahu more privileges and vastly awards Israel.

Netanyahu said in a TV address that the West Bank annexation plans were only "delayed", but they remain "on the table". He declared saying "there is no change in plan to apply sovereignty to Judea and Samaria (West Bank) in full coordination with the US. I am committed to it. That has not changed. I remind you that I was the one who put the issue of sovereignty over Judea and Samaria on the table. This issue remains on the table". This means that the UAE offered normalisation in return for nothing. From another side, in spite that Netanyahu is also facing criticism inside his own Likud Party, whose members strongly supported annexation, he still bids his party will perceive the peace agreement as having extended benefits than a unilateral annexation does. Also, the agreement could boost Netanyahu's personal stocks and solidify Netanyahu's domestic claims to have significantly advanced acceptance of Israel within the Arab world, as he has been domestically alleged for corruption, his popularity plummeted amid the spread of COVID-19 pandemic, and while unemployment was skyrocketing as the result of earlier lockdown measures. The agreement also comes at a time where Netanyahu's shaky coalition government is plagued by facing the possibility of early elections. Therefore, with the Israeli elections maybe close, an immediate peace deal with a neighbouring Arab state would represent a significant achievement for Netanyahu. However, annexation is fundamentally a diminished subject at the domestic level in Israel with the re-upsurge in COVID-19 cases, thereby the Netanyahu's plans were already dithering long before the agreement.

The UAE also delivered a valuable diplomatic achievement to Trump who has been tightly regressive; by advancing at resolving the issues that have long bothered him, that is the Arab-Israeli tensions and the Iranian nuclear program. The accords also grant a rare diplomatic win to Trump, in light of the upcoming November elections, thereby the deal would clearly support his claims at intending to achieve a resolution to Arab-Israeli conflict, and would pacify relations until the elections are over.

Threats may also arise by Iran against the UAE, as Iran's Tasnim News Agency, which is affiliated to the country's elite Revolutionary Guards, said the Israel-UAE deal was "shameful", yet the UAE has been working to strengthen its relations with Tehran, in parallel with the rapprochement with Israel, where this engagement with Iran aimed at mitigating the risk of a regional war and not a drastic improvement in UAE's relationship with Iran, considering the escalating tensions between the US and Iran due to the re-imposed US economic sanctions, promises of retaliation after the killing of Qasem Soleimani in Iraq, and a potential military confrontation especially at the Strait of Hormuz. The UAE was able to balance between its US-Israel and Iran relations. As the UAE supported President Donald Trump's maximum pressure strategy towards Iran, it was anxious about by the brinkmanship in the US-Iran relations in the Gulf. It followed a policy consisting of taking a step towards each of Iran and Israel. Indeed, freezing annexation plans comes in favour of the Trump's administration, as it maintains its "anti-Iran" alliance that the US succeeded to build between Israel and the GCC, as

well as supporting UAE's dual policy towards Iran and Israel. The de facto alliance between the UAE and Iran sought by President Trump was subject to abandoning (for the meantime at least) the annexation plan. This comes even though Netanyahu, by dropping of the annexation plan, risked a possible change in the White House ahead of the presence of Joe Biden, who opposes any unilateral moves towards taking over Palestinian lands by Israel. Thus, Trump was successfully able to seize the UAE and Israel's common enemy to achieve this agreement.

Conclusion

The agreement seems more about Iran than it is about the Palestinian Cause and annexation of land. Both UAE and Israel view their strategic goal is to contain Iran in the region, regardless of any converge between UAE and Iran. To be precise, UAE's engagement with Iran is a cold temporary peace rather than a true rapprochement. In fact, the UAE was smart enough to achieve the agreement at a time when it had better relations with Iran, and to be able to help avoid any future criticisms by Trump towards the UAE in case of the latter's rapprochement with Iran.

The UAE attempts to save Trump and Netanyahu from their political problems. They need a peace plan to penetrate a region in the Gulf, that is, a region where they do not share any common history. The UAE also wants to raise moral, economic, and military weight, as it hugely profits by accomplishing such an agreement that it barely loses anything. It gets a prestigious regional leadership vis-à-vis Turkey, Iran and Qatar, champions

a resolution to the Palestinian cause, profits economically in terms of high-tech industries, as well as security/military profits.

From another side, the Palestinian officials considered the agreement a "betrayal of Jerusalem, Al-Aqsa, and the Palestinian cause". In effect, one of the most important aims behind this agreement is attempting to pre-empt the Palestinian, regional, and international scenes for the Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas's successor, who is obviously assumed to be Mohammed Dahlan. This case resembles other experiences of introducing leaders such as Khalifa Haftar in Libya, Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo in Sudan, etc. This will subject the Palestinian political future to UAE preferences, as well as the Saudi, in case a settlement was achieved with Mohammed bin Salman, and no divergence occurred between the two parties.

In essence, Netanyahu's ambitions are not achieved yet; they were only put "on hold". He still intends to achieve way more than was achieved. UAE came to make Netanyahu's dreams come true, yet through causing confusion and giving rest to both Israel and the US to rearrange their houses amid various crises that have been hitting the region. This agreement can be considered as a short break for all parties due to the uncertainty of international politics.

The UAE acts now to deal with the desire of each party and secure his interests in the region. It is keen to achieve victory and play pro-active roles on the issue of annexing lands and reach agreements that have not been previously achieved. Perhaps we would soon hear the UAE Peace Plan,

as it further burnishes its campaign to be a beacon of tolerance in the Middle East and present itself out first in a regional recognition race among neighbouring Gulf states.

Following is a timeline of the normalization path of the UAE-Israeli relations (excluding unannounced secret visits by the Israeli Prime Minister to the UAE):

Date	Incident
2015	Media reports uncovers a meeting between Mohammed Dahlan with the far-right Israeli Defense Minister, Avigdor Lieberman, in Paris.
September 2, 2016	UAE army participated in joint military exercises with the Pakistani, Spanish and Israeli air forces in the US state of Nevada.
March 2017	UAE military participated in joint military exercises with the US, Greek, Italian and Israeli air forces.
July 21, 2017	“Haaretz” wrote that Netanyahu met Abdullah bin Zayed Al Nahyan in New York.
October 2018	UAE administration allowed Israeli athletes to participate and raise the Israeli flag in the Judo Championship hosted in Abu Dhabi.
October 30, 2018	Israeli Minister of Communications Ayoub Kara participated in a telecommunications conference held in Dubai and delivered a speech.
July 2019	Former Israeli Foreign and Intelligence Minister Israel Katz, visited Abu Dhabi to participate in the United Nations Climate Conference, and the UAE extended an invitation to Israeli companies to participate in Expo2020Dubai.
August 20, 2019	“Haaretz” said in a report that Israel and Abu Dhabi cooperated massively, worth \$3 billion, to provide modern intelligence tools, including spy planes.
May 20, 2020	The Emirates Airlines launched its first flight to Israel to deliver medical supplies to support Palestine in combating COVID-19.
June 6, 2020	Around 3000 Jews from different countries residing in the UAE created an official account for the Jewish community on Twitter.
June 10, 2020	Etihad Airways launched a second direct flight to Israel, claiming to provide medical aid to Palestine.
June 16, 2020	UAE Minister of State for Foreign Affairs, Anwar Gargash, said in an online conference organized by the American Jewish Committee that “the UAE believes that keeping channels of communication open with Israel will lead to better results for both countries”.
June 25, 2020	Netanyahu announced that Tel Aviv will sign an agreement of cooperation to fight COVID-19 with the UAE.
June 26, 2020	UAE sent 100,000 COVID-19 diagnostic packages, and the

	UAE announced launching of a joint project with Israel to combat the pandemic.
July 3, 2020	Two Israeli companies signed an agreement with the Emirati "G42" to develop technological solutions to combat COVID-19.
August 10, 2020	After 15 years apart, a Yemeni Jewish family met with the rest of its members, who have been residing in the UAE. The latter have granted citizenship to the Yemeni family.
August 13, 2020	UAE and Israel agreed to sign agreements to work towards a full normalisation of relations.

Source: “min alkhafa’ ilā al’alan.. tasalsul tārikhy limasār altatbī’ bayn ali’ mārāt wa’ isrāi’īl,” Al Jazeera, 14/8/2020, accessed on 15/8/2020, at: <https://bit.ly/3kLqq78>

About the author

Mahjoob Zweiri is an Associate Professor of Contemporary History and Politics, and Director of the Gulf Studies Center, Qatar University.

About the Gulf Insights series:

The "Gulf Insights" series is published by the Gulf Studies Center on a weekly base with the aim to promote informed debate with academic depth. The Gulf Insights are

commentaries on pressing regional issues written by the GSC/GSP faculty, staff PhD and MA students, as well as guest scholars, and they can be between 1,200 to 1,500 words.

All articles published under “Gulf Insight” series have been discussed internally but they reflect the opinion and views of the authors, and do not reflect the views of the Center, the College of Arts and Sciences or Qatar University.