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The Gulf States and the Middle East Peace Process: Considerations, Stakes, and Options

Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, Ph.D, Fellow for the Middle East

INTRODUCTION

This issue brief examines where the six nations of the Gulf Cooperation Council—Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE)—currently stand in their outlook and approaches toward the Israeli–Palestinian issue. The first section of this brief begins by outlining how positions among the six Gulf states have evolved over the three decades since the Madrid Conference of 1991. Section two analyzes the degree to which the six Gulf states’ relations with Israel are based on interests, values, or a combination of both, and how these differ from state to state. Section three details the Gulf states’ responses to the peace plan unveiled by the Trump administration in January 2020. This section also analyzes the impact of the uncertainties in domestic politics both in Israel and in the United States, as well as the August 13, 2020 announcement by President Donald Trump that Israel and the UAE had reached an agreement to normalize relations.

FROM HOSTILITY TO PRAGMATISM

With the partial exception of Kuwait, the position of the Gulf states toward Israel has shifted from varying degrees of outright hostility through the 1970s and 1980s to one of pragmatic and increasingly open accommodation since the 1990s. While not “front-line states” in the Arab–Israeli

conflict, the Gulf states complied with and enforced the Arab League boycott of Israel until at least 1994 and participated in the oil embargo of countries that supported Israel in the Yom Kippur War of 1973.¹ In 1973, for example, the president of the UAE, Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan, claimed that “No Arab country is safe from the perils of the battle with Zionism unless it plays its role and bears its responsibilities, in confronting the Israeli enemy.”² In Kuwait, Sheikh Fahd al-Ahmad Al Sabah, a brother of two future Emirs, was wounded while fighting with Fatah in Jordan in 1968,³ while in 1981 the Saudi government offered to finance the reconstruction of Iraq’s Osirak nuclear reactor after it was destroyed by an Israeli airstrike.⁴

Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait in August 1990 and the Gulf War of early 1991 began the process of recalibrating views of Israel in (most) Gulf capitals. The Iraqi occupation of Kuwait demonstrated that it was not Israel that presented the greatest threat to national or even to regional security, and Saudi officials, in particular, appreciated Israel’s restraint under fire from Iraqi Scud missiles during the Gulf War.⁵ Discreet and direct contact between officials and policymakers from the Gulf states and Israel began at the Madrid Conference from October to November 1991 and has since increased in scope, scale, and seniority. In 1994, U.S. officials credited Saudi Arabia’s longtime ambassador to the United States, Prince Bandar bin Sultan Al Saud, with



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lobbying for the Gulf states' lifting of the secondary boycott of entities that trade with Israel.⁶ Also in 1994, Oman became the first Gulf state to host an Israeli delegation for a post-Madrid working group meeting, as well as the first Gulf state to host a visit by an Israeli prime minister, Yitzhak Rabin.⁷

Since the mid-1990s, Oman has hosted the Middle East Desalination Research Center (MEDRC). A product of the multilateral working group on water resources, the MEDRC is today the only surviving organization established by decisions made in the Oslo Accords of 1993 and 1995. The MEDRC has become a model of cooperation in shared research and capacity-building between Israel and Arab states and has also supported multi-track diplomacy by enabling and facilitating professional and diplomatic interaction.⁸ A generation later, in 2009, the headquartering of the newly created International Renewable Energy Agency (IRENA) in Abu Dhabi provided further opportunities for such engagement around "apolitical" and technocratic issues of mutual importance to Israel and the Gulf states. Israel, which has been a member of the organization since its launch, supported the Emirati bid to host IRENA and in 2015 opened a permanent office in the UAE to house the Israeli mission accredited to IRENA.⁹

What changed after 2011 was the Arab Spring upheaval that redrew threat perceptions and geopolitical interests in key regional capitals around a shared interest in combating the perceived spread of Iranian influence and political Islam in the Middle East. At the macro-level, this realignment was strongest in Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Bahrain and coincided with a growing sentiment that the Palestinian issue was no longer the defining fault-line of regional politics in the twenty-first century. As security interests converged, new forms of (tacit) cooperation emerged, such as the sharing of surveillance technology and the coordination of messaging during the Iran nuclear negotiations.¹⁰ Officials in Riyadh, Abu Dhabi, and Jerusalem felt cut out of the negotiating process and expressed reservations at the separation of the

nuclear file from the wider issue of Iran's regionally destabilizing policies.¹¹ Contacts between Saudi, Emirati, and Israeli officials became more visible, higher-level and more frequent once the Trump administration entered the White House in January 2017 and made public its intent to leave the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action.¹²

GULF-ISRAEL RELATIONS TODAY

The shift in attitude among ruling elites in Gulf states toward Israel is to some extent a result of generational change and the rise to prominence of a younger cadre of leaders for whom the wars of 1948, 1956, 1967, and 1973 are no longer a visceral personal experience. The pragmatic engagement of the current crown prince of Abu Dhabi, Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, differs markedly from the (above-noted) ardent stance of his father, Sheikh Zayed. The same can be said of the current crown prince of Saudi Arabia, Mohammed bin Salman Al Saud, whose criticism of the Palestinians during his March 2018 visit to the United States may have surprised his father, King Salman, who counted his leadership of the Popular Committee for Assisting the Palestinian Mujahideen among his many roles in his six decades in public life.¹³

Age, however, is not the sole determinant. Aging leaders in Bahrain (King Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa) and Oman (the late Sultan Qaboos bin Said Al Said) were among the most open—in different ways and for different reasons—to engaging with Israeli counterparts. In Qatar, the 2013 handover from Father Emir Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani to his 33-year-old son, Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani, led only to a change in style, not substance, of Qatar's pragmatic relationship with Israel and the Palestinian issue. Kuwait's often populist National Assembly makes it likely that the Kuwaiti leadership will continue to oppose normalization with Israel, absent a comprehensive peace settlement, after the 91-year-old Emir Sabah al-Ahmad Al Sabah, a staunch and lifelong defender of the Palestinian cause, passes from the scene.

Leaders in each of the Gulf states instead base their decision on whether (or not) and how to engage with Israel on a set of primarily domestic considerations that are best examined on a case-by-case basis. Oman has hosted visits by three Israeli prime ministers (Shimon Peres in 1996 and Benjamin Netanyahu in 2018, in addition to Rabin's already-noted visit in 1994) as well as an Israeli trade office in the 1990s.¹⁴ Qatar also hosted an Israeli trade office in the 2000s and visits by senior Israeli officials, including Shimon Peres in 1996 (as prime minister) and 2007 (as vice prime minister) and Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni in 2008.¹⁵ In 2012, Emir Hamad became the first head of state to visit Gaza since Hamas secured control of the territory in 2007, while under Emir Tamim, Qatar has provided humanitarian and financial support to Gaza in coordination with Israeli officials. In February 2020, the head of Mossad, Yossi Cohen, visited Doha to request that Qatar continue its monthly cash transfers that enable the payment of civil service salaries and the provision of aid to impoverished families in Gaza.¹⁶

While Oman and Qatar have prioritized low-level trade and pragmatic diplomatic engagement with Israel, the decade since the Arab uprisings began in December 2010 has witnessed a geopolitical realignment that provides the context for the greater formalization of links between Israel and Saudi Arabia and the UAE. For decades, the "official" Saudi position vis-à-vis the peace process was encapsulated in the Fahd Plan of 1981 and the Arab Peace Initiative unveiled by Crown Prince (later King) Abdullah in 2002. Both plans put forward proposals for Arab recognition of Israel in return for Israeli withdrawal from occupied Arab territory, but, whereas Fahd's plan faced stiff resistance from Hafez al-Assad's Syria, the Abdullah initiative was endorsed unanimously by the Arab League at its 2002 summit.¹⁷ In April 2018, amid the controversy over the U.S. embassy's move to Jerusalem, King Salman followed the example of his two predecessors as he labeled an Arab League summit hosted by Saudi Arabia as the "Jerusalem Summit" and restated Saudi opposition to unilateral

Israeli (and U.S.) actions that contravened internationally agreed positions.¹⁸

Since about 2015, commentary in Saudi-owned pan-Arab media outlets has often placed greater emphasis on shared security and geopolitical interests (if not values), while official and nonofficial dialogue between Saudi and Israeli officials not only has become more open, but has also been covered by local media. An example was the visit of a "delegation" of Saudi academic and business figures to Israel in July 2016 led by a retired general, Anwar Eshki, who had developed a channel of communication, via multiple Track II meetings, with Dore Gold, the director general of Israel's Ministry of Foreign Affairs and a trusted confidante of Prime Minister Netanyahu. Unlike previous meetings, Eshki's visit was covered by Saudi as well as Israeli media, and, in an interview with the Tel Aviv-based newspaper *Yedioth Ahronoth*, Eshki asserted that "circumstances have changed" in the geopolitics of the Middle East.¹⁹

Like Saudi Arabia, the UAE has drawn closer to Israel in regional geopolitics and security, but the Emirati leadership has felt freer to express and pursue closer ties than their Saudi counterparts, who remain cautiously mindful of their role as Custodians of the Two Holy Mosques (of Islam). Trade between the UAE and Israel has multiplied in recent years and is conducted mostly through intermediary companies and focused primarily on agricultural and medical technologies and security and communications systems.²⁰ In 2016, Abu Dhabi installed an emirate-wide surveillance system, Falcon Eye, developed by a company owned by an Israeli businessman, and UAE entities are believed to have utilized software and cybersecurity products developed by Israel-based technology companies.²¹ Coordination in other sectors also expanded, and in the months preceding the August 2020 declaration on the normalization of ties, the UAE and Israel announced plans to work together on research technology to combat Covid-19.²²

Along with Bahrain, the UAE has also developed a values-based form of outreach based on interfaith dialogue and religious tolerance that has added an additional

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layer to the alignment of interests. As tools of “soft power,” the Emirati and Bahraini initiatives send a message of moderation to an international audience that, in part, deflects from and obscures the domestic crackdowns on Islamists (in the UAE) and a primarily Shia-led political opposition (in Bahrain). Since 2014, Abu Dhabi has hosted an annual Forum for Promoting Peace in Muslim Societies attended by Christian, Jewish, and Muslim faith leaders. The December 2019 summit released the *New Alliance of Virtue* that affirmed the shared values of the three Abrahamic faiths and enshrined those values in a charter based on tolerance and religious freedom.²³ Also in 2019 the UAE made history by welcoming the first papal visit to the Arabian Peninsula, as Pope Francis paid a high-profile visit that included a public mass before an audience of 135,000 in Abu Dhabi.²⁴

Bahrain is home to the only surviving indigenous Jewish community in any of the Gulf states, and its leaders have been among the most prominent and vocal in calling for a paradigm shift in the region’s relationship with Israel. A July 2009 op-ed in the *Washington Post* by Crown Prince Salman bin Hamad Al Khalifa called for fresh thinking on Arab-Israeli issues and direct communication between the leaders and people of the regions. In writing that “peace will bring prosperity,” the crown prince anticipated by almost exactly 10 years the theme and title of the “Peace to Prosperity” economic conference that took place in Bahrain in June 2019 as part of the Trump administration’s push for a new approach to the peace process.²⁵ By the time of the 2019 conference, Bahrain’s King Hamad had gone on record opposing the Arab boycott of Israel (in 2017), while Bahrain’s foreign minister, Sheikh Khalid bin Ahmed Al Khalifa, had done the same over Israel’s right to defend itself (against Iran in 2018).²⁶

Kuwait remains the regional outlier, although a 2008 U.S. diplomatic cable released by WikiLeaks asserted that a senior member of the ruling Al Sabah family had been entrusted with “maintaining a discreet and confidential liaison relationship with a dual national Israeli representative based elsewhere in the Gulf.”²⁷

THE TRUMP PLAN AND THE ABRAHAM ACCORD

The cautious responses by officials in all Gulf states to the Trump administration’s attempts since 2017 to push forward its own approach to the peace process have been tempered, in part, by the desire to avoid a rupture with this most transactional and unconventional of recent U.S. presidencies. The strong economic focus of the initiative that Trump tasked his senior advisor (and son-in-law) Jared Kushner to draw up, led the administration to identify the Gulf states as partners to a peace deal. In addition, the White House appeared to have settled on an “outside-in” process that focused on normalizing Arab-Israeli relations rather than advocating for an Israeli-Palestinian agreement in the first instance.²⁸ This approach was manifest in the “Peace to Prosperity” conference that took place in Bahrain in June 2019 as the economic component of the vision for peace that Trump later unveiled at the White House in January 2020, with the Bahraini, Emirati, and Omani ambassadors in attendance, and in the August 2020 agreement to normalize UAE-Israel relations brokered by the Trump administration.²⁹

Officials in Gulf capitals responded to the January 2020 peace plan, officially entitled *Peace to Prosperity: A Vision to Improve the Lives of the Palestinian and Israeli People* and launched by Trump at a press conference with Prime Minister Netanyahu without any Palestinian representatives present, in careful and measured tones. While there was some appreciation that a new approach to the decades-old peace process was required, officials in Gulf capitals gave qualified support to the Trump administration’s willingness to think outside the box, albeit not to the specific proposals contained in the plan, and reiterated the call for direct negotiations between Israelis and Palestinians.³⁰

Officials in Gulf capitals additionally expressed some concern that they could be asked or expected to foot a large part of the bill of the economic component of any successful peace initiative, which might, in part, explain why there was little follow-through to the June 2019 conference in

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Bahrain. With all six economies hit hard by the spread of Covid-19 and the fall in energy prices in 2020, the coronavirus pandemic has exposed economic vulnerabilities and created new fragilities in the Gulf states. Decision-makers in the Gulf are likely to focus more on domestic rather than regional spending priorities in a “post-Covid” era, and the multiple uncertainties mean that Gulf actors may refrain from any further moves until the political and economic landscape becomes clearer.

The need to balance their careful diplomatic non-rejection of the plan with domestic and regional media and public criticism of its perceived imbalance in favor of Israeli interests led representatives of all six Gulf states to sign statements by the Arab League and Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC) that rejected the plan and restated their support for Palestine.³¹ Symbolically, given Saudi Arabia’s role in the Muslim world, the emergency meeting of the OIC took place in Jeddah, and its statement, adopted unanimously, declared categorically that the Trump plan “lacks the minimum requirements of justice and destroys the foundations of peace.”³²

Regardless of what may or may not occur in U.S. and Israeli politics in the final months of 2020, there is demonstrably a greater willingness in (most) Gulf capitals to work with Israel, and to do so openly, as well as to work with the Palestinian leadership and with the U.S. to support a breakthrough in the peace process. The August 2020 announcement of the Israel-UAE plan to normalize ties did not elicit any diplomatic backlash in other Gulf states, with Bahrain and Oman going on record to support the deal. The Saudi foreign minister, Prince Faisal bin Farhan Al Saud, restated the Kingdom’s support for the 2002 Arab Peace Initiative and the importance of basing a peace agreement on international parameters. However, he qualified this by adding that the Israel-UAE deal “could be viewed as positive” if it suspended unilateral Israeli actions on annexation.³³

Such nuanced reactions were hardly a surprise as the agreement formalized the already existing and barely concealed informal connections that extend to varying

degrees across five of the six Gulf states.³⁴ To the extent that there was a backlash to the prospect of normalization, it was concentrated in media and social media commentary, including in Saudi Arabia, and in statements of opposition by civil society organizations and public intellectuals in other Gulf states.³⁵ In addition, the lack of an immediate statement from the Arab League, in contrast to its rapid February 2020 rejection of the Trump plan, is likely a reflection of the challenge it now faces, given the breaking of the regional consensus by such a prominent and powerful member as the UAE.

The so-called “Abraham Accord” between Israel and the UAE nevertheless represents a departure from the “land for peace” principle at the heart of the Arab Peace Initiative. It also represents a break in the consensus (at least on paper, if not always in practice) that a comprehensive peace agreement would precede any formal normalization with Israel. Like Trump’s “Peace to Prosperity” plan earlier in 2020, it has upended years of settled precedent on the contours of a deal to end the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and establishes new parameters whose durability may outlast the Trump administration and complicate any effort to reengage in Arab-Israeli negotiations later on. Moreover, any suggestion that the Abraham Accord has traded annexation for normalization is facile at best, as the threat of annexation has merely been suspended and remains on the table. In any case, it is also inconsistent with the long-established principle of land for peace.³⁶

Key issues remain unresolved for any serious push for a meaningful peace settlement, whether in a second Trump term or a Joe Biden presidency. Political dynamics in Israel and the U.S. may make the threat of annexation of parts of the West Bank either more or less likely, depending on how they evolve. However, should annexation occur, it would likely suspend, if not halt, the process of Emirati normalization with Israel and place all Gulf leaders in a position where they would have to take a direct stance most have tried to avoid. The ongoing political uncertainty in Israel and the November 2020 presidential election in the

U.S. may mean that officials in the Gulf will adopt a “wait-and-see” approach and push any further policy initiatives to 2021.

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AUTHOR

Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, Ph.D., is a Baker Institute fellow for the Middle East. Working across the disciplines of political science, international relations and international political economy, his research examines the changing position of Persian Gulf states in the global order, as well as the emergence of longer-term, nonmilitary challenges to regional security.

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