



The UAE-Israel Normalization – What Does It Exactly Mean?

by Ibrahim Joubari, Emre Bilgin, Zafer Kizilkaya, Erman Atak, Onur Sultan, Furkan Akar, Hasan Suzen

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Background

- On [June 19](#), the UAE-affiliated Southern Transitional Council (STC) forces wrested control of the Socotra Island.
- On [August 28](#), there circulated news that the UAE and Israel were going to build intelligence gathering hubs in Socotra Island of Yemen.
- On [September 15](#), the President Trump presided over a meeting at the White House where UAE, Israel and Bahrain signed a treaty of peace, start of diplomatic relations, and full normalization. This was the third time Israel established diplomatic relations with Arab nations, following Egypt (1979) and Jordan (1994).

Analysis

Under perfect conditions, it would be better to form this analysis based on one development, like the latest among the three above. However, the regional dynamics and aspirations of the two blocs mostly represented by Turkey and Qatar on the one hand, and Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the UAE on the other hand pushes us to take into consideration different competitions outplayed in different theaters like Yemen, Libya and Eastern Mediterranean at the same time.

For Israel, “Abraham Accords Peace Agreement” between UAE and Israel is like a stating the obvious. The agreement formalizes the long-term covert relation between the two. They had secret diplomatic contacts for some time and the agreement brings that into the open. The agreement is a political achievement for Netanyahu and a strategic achievement for Israel. Israel does not have to withdraw from West Bank or make concessions about any territory as this is not a requirement. What is more, the agreement will benefit from regional cooperation both in economic and security terms.

Israel stands to benefit from UAE’s economic status alongside its important geographical location. As well as being a gateway to a dynamic Far East and Southeast Asia, the UAE has various valuable source of networking opportunities. Israel will extend its own defensive measures further from its borders. Israel will increase its benefits not only in security collaborations but also in terms of economic cooperation and also in terms of public perception. By using Arab market opportunities, it will probably be able to change the perception from the most hated country in the region to a desired partner. The “Abraham Accords Peace Agreement” builds a new fluidity and changes the regional dynamics in favor of Israel. There are also some other Arab states like Oman, Kuwait, Morocco and Sudan that are willing to follow suit in normalization with Israel. Israel gained a strategic normalization, but not as the result of resolving the conflict with the Palestinians. Palestinian issue is no longer a barrier in relations between Israel and Arab countries. New generation in the region sees the Palestinian issue only a narrative or a political demagoguery especially used by Iran and Turkey.

This Agreement has been signed in the time of weakest strategic point of Palestinian Authority (PA) since its establishment. Although PA experience difficult and painful periods, Israel does not want the collapse of PA. Collapse of PA would bring more complex security issues for Israel. Israel must increase its cooperation with PA, so that the Palestinians too benefit from the fruits of agreement. Yet, the internal popular opinion in Palestine has been souring steadily against any cooperation with Israel, even in the West Bank. Indeed, there have been steady calls for a return to a public uprising, similar to the intifada in 1987 that was the precursor of the Oslo accords.

For the UAE, Yemen has a special importance due to its location controlling Bab al-Mandab Strait. Having already acquired naval bases in Assab (Eritrea) and Barbara (Somaliland), the UAE is willing to expand control and project power through new bases in strategic ports like Aden, Socotra and Perim Islands. Its general policy within Yemen differentiates from that of Saudi Arabia as it acts towards a divided Yemen and formation of Southern Yemen that will be support to its regional ambitions. In this regard, the country has supported STC in building well-equipped and trained forces, and the latter has so far helped the UAE ambitions by delivering control of the Socotra island to it.

The UAE has strong aversion to Muslim Brotherhood (MB) and the political Islam. One of the reasons for its aversion to the government in Yemen is the dominance of the Islah Party (MB extension in Yemen). Also based on the same reason, the UAE is following a set of policies that are geared towards counter balancing MB in the region. The country is also a party to the war in Libya, supporting Haftar to counter GNA where MB is dominant again.

Especially in the aftermath of the Coalition school bus air assault that killed at least 26 and the Khashoggi killing in Saudi embassy in Turkey shifted the perception towards the Coalition and selling of arms to its members in an extremely negative direction. The UAE calculation is probably that the alliance with Israel, a regional power would support its ambitions to counter Turkish effect on mutual-interest basis and that the latter would provide it with superior weapons and defense systems that could bridge the gap between the UAE ambitions and its limited manpower. The formation of such intelligence hub can be an extension of this calculation.

As regards accession of **Bahrain** to the agreement, there should be no surprises. The GCC countries except for Qatar are well aligned in terms of foreign policies. The focus should be on understanding the reasons behind non-accession of the Saudi Arabia. **Saudi Arabia** is the guardian of the two holiest places for the Muslims, Mecca and Medina, and it has a symbolic representative role. Based on that, the kingdom should not be expected to make a bold move and establish an open link with Israel. At least, this will not come until there is great change in the public opinion towards the issue both in Saudi Arabia and the Muslim world. This of course does not exclude negotiations / deals behind closed doors.

Within **Yemen**, the agreement itself, the UAE control on the island and the news for establishment of an intelligence hub has been a major source of unrest. The backing of the agreement by the Deputy Chief of STC has created divisions even within the STC itself, voices raising against any such normalization. The event also reinforces Houthi rhetoric that it is fighting an “American, Saudi, Emirati, Zionist” coalition and provides it with a new potential to exploit for better recruitment. For the legitimate government, the event has two repercussions. First, the STC that has served control of Socotra to the UAE, was part of the government formed after Riyadh Agreement. This means effectively sabotaging the peace efforts within the country that foresaw power sharing between the legitimate government and the STC. Second, deployment of forces to the island by the UAE without even informing the government flies in the face of respecting sovereignty rights of the Yemeni state. Last week, there were reports that STC-aligned forces returned back to Aden while 600 Sudanese and Senegalese troops arrived at the island. This week there are reports showing the Saudi Arabian forces started to establish military base in the eastern province of al-Mahrah (Hawf Protected Area), the part of Yemen that has been least touched from the war. These developments cannot take place in a country that is not inflicted by war. The Coalition that has entered Yemen upon request from President Hadi to roll back Houthis seems currently busy expanding their gains instead of following a common cause against Houthis.

Although the deal has no direct connection with the war in **Libya**, Israel-Arab rapprochement will likely impact the interests of Turkey, the most prominent backer of the GNA and MB affiliated groups in the western Libya. UAE is the leading arms supporter of the Haftar’s LNA and Eastern Libya groups. Anti-Turkey sentiments among Arab states and Israel and Turkey’s intervention to Libya are among the significant drivers of the mentioned partnership. Arabs need to have the alliance and weapons of US/Israel in their fight against Turkey. Trump is benefiting from this need for the sake of his Israel policies. While Israel has no political influence on the war in Libya, if this rapprochement leads to arms and technology transfer from Israel to Arab states, then UAE can transfer this edge to the war in Libya. Fightings since the beginning of this year demonstrated that the impact of Turkish UAVs and air defence systems are consequential. Up to now, the trio of the UAE, Saudi Arabia and Egypt were transferring Chinese UAVs or old Russian air defence systems (Panthir), which proved to be not much useful. Israel made high-end arms systems might change the direction of the tide in the battlefield.

The Syrian regime has remained silent on the UAE-Israel deal. It did not publicly condemn it like Iran nor dit it welcome it like several Gulf states. There are three reasons for its silent position: first of all, Bashar Al Assad values its relations with the UAE which shares the Baathist regime’s animosity towards Muslim Brotherhood. The UAE has restarted its diplomatic activities in Syria and it is keen to provide help to the Syrian regime in reconstructing the war-torn country. The UAE is also leading the efforts to reconnect the Assad regime to the Arab world by changing the anti-Assad stance in the Arab League and the Gulf Cooperation Council. The financial help of UAE has become more

critical for Syria which is seriously suffering from the US sanctions. The sanctions have deteriorated the dire economic conditions. Second; both the UAE and Syria view Turkey as a common enemy and they perceive the interventionist “Neo-Ottoman” Turkish foreign policy as a serious security threat. This hatred against the government in Turkey leads Arab leaders to seek alternative partners, with Israel becoming a potential candidate. Finally, on the other side of the coin, the Syrian regime has still not left its anti-Zionist position and the anti-Israel propaganda is still disseminated by the Syrian media. Israel still occupies the Golan region and the regime in Syria does not appear to be willing to step back from its anti-Israeli stance (at least publicly).

For **Lebanon**, the breach made by the signature of the agreement between UAE and Israel, and the constant pressure exercised by the US, which led to imposition of heavy sanctions on many politicians affiliated with Hezbollah and even two of their allies (with surprising sanctions against a Christian ally) has ‘encouraged’ the Lebanese political elites to accept a new round of land and maritime border delimitation talks with Israel, with US mediation. Even Hezbollah, Iran’s proxy and Israel’s nemesis has agreed to these talks. It is hard to see these talks leading to normalization between Lebanon and Israel. Yet, with the rapidly evolving developments in the region, and the deteriorating financial and economic situation of Lebanon, it is not beyond the realm of possibilities to see more traction along this axis, especially with the promise of substantial aid for the beleaguered country. In the end, much depends on who will be elected on November 3 in the US.

As regards the developments in **the Eastern Mediterranean**, the Middle East peace plan and particularly the UAE-Israel agreement can be said to be separate. However, Turkey’s assertiveness in the region created a powerful anti-Turkey Alliance as mentioned above. Egypt, Israel, Greece, Cyprus, Italy, and Jordan formalized Eastern Med Gas Forum excluding Turkey. The Palestinian authority is also a part of the agreement. France requested to join the Forum and the US and the EU applied for an observer status. The members of the Forum have adopted a rivalry attitude against Turkey. The forum will foster the rapprochement between Israel and Arab countries initiated by the Middle East Peace Plan. Along the same lines, Arab countries and Israel have made recent statements framing Turkey as the number one threat against the stability in the region.

Strategic Foresight

Based on the analyses above, it is highly likely that:

- Israel will try to exploit the deal to sign normalization deals with other countries that were waiting for the first move to be done. Those include Oman, Kuwait, Morocco and Sudan in the first place,
- Both Israel and UAE will try to exploit the geographical location of the Socotra island to build up their existence (Israel has listening station on Mt. Amba Sawara and docks in the Dahlak Archipelago (Eritrea); the UAE has naval bases in Assab (Eritrea) and Barbara (Somaliland)),
- Israel will benefit economically from deal as Israeli trade will find more destinations under normalized relations, more touristic travels will take place and finally Israel will expand its market for selling arms and weapons systems to the MENA countries.
- The tide of the war in Libya will not change in short term although in longer terms this can be possible,
- The deal will further isolate Turkey in the region,
- The Coalition formed to support the legitimate government against Houthis will lose credibility and public support, and the rift between the STC and the government will become wider. The hopes for a unified Yemeni state in the foreseeable future is gone. The prospects for peace in Yemen also get more elusive.
- The border delimitation talks between Lebanon and Israel will continue, and might lead to formalization of an agreement within six months.