

How Israel and the Arab World Are Making Peace Without a Peace Deal

It turns out that solving the Palestinian question isn't essential after all. And the Trump administration, Israel and a few of the Gulf Arabs seem fine with that.

Without much fanfare or notice, the first known commercial aircraft from the United Arab Emirates recently landed at Israel's Ben Gurion airport. It was carrying Covid-19 supplies for the Palestinian Authority, which, out of pique, rejected them.

As unprecedented as the flight was, it really shouldn't have come as much of a surprise. For the past five years, contacts between Israel and the Gulf states—especially Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Bahrain—have been booming. The examples of what amounts to a Great Thaw in an otherwise frozen political landscape are plentiful:

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, together with his wife and the director of Israel's Mossad intelligence service, has been received in Oman by the late sultan. He has met the UAE and Omani foreign ministers in the U.S. Israel's minister of culture has visited Dubai. Israelis, including Jerusalem's chief rabbi, have been welcomed in Bahrain, and Bahrain has reached out to Israel for help battling Covid-19. Israeli athletes have competed in judo competitions in the UAE, where, for the first time, the Israeli national anthem was played and the Israeli flag displayed. Trade between Israel and the Gulf states is now estimated at about \$1 billion a year. One Israeli-owned company, AGT International, has reportedly concluded an \$800 million deal with the UAE for border surveillance equipment. And this partial list comprises only the visible signs. Much more on the intelligence and security side is reportedly happening below the waterline.

Even more stunning, this putative détente is taking place on the watch of a right-wing Israeli prime minister who doesn't even feign interest in a two-state solution and is doing everything he can to ensure one never emerges by keeping large parts of West Bank and all of Jerusalem. Contrary to the warnings from diplomats, analysts, and peaceniks who predicted Israel would become a pariah if it didn't

settle up with the Palestinians, Israel seems to be making more progress toward normalization with Arab regimes without a credible peace process than with one.

Clearly the Gulf states aren't on the verge of full normalization with Israel; nor is the Arab world willing to untether itself from the emotional pull of Palestinian issue or its hostile and all too often anti-Semitic views of Israel. But even the most skeptical observers would have to admit something has changed.

So what explains this shift?

Three significant factors. The rise of Iran and Sunni jihadists spewing terror across the region has created a narrow but important coincidence of interests between Israel and the Arab world. Increasing exhaustion and frustration with the never-ending Palestinian cause has opened up more space for Arab states to follow their own interests. But behind it all, lay a White House enamored of Arab money for arms sales and investment in the U.S. and eager to marshal the Arabs in the service of its anti-Iranian and pro-Israeli agenda. Indeed, in an effort to court the Gulf Arabs, Trump, and his Middle East envoy son-in-law Jared Kushner have given the Saudis *carte blanche* to pursue disastrous policies while holding their coats. And Arab nations, sensing opportunities with an autocrat-friendly U.S. president, have been only too happy to follow.

From the Israeli perspective, the reasons for the *détente* are not hard to divine. Netanyahu's regional outreach to the Arab world is part of his broader campaign to project Israel's political profile internationally with historic visits into Latin America, Asia, South Asia, and Africa. Israel now has more diplomatic recognition in the international community than at any time since independence. In the Middle East, his outreach is aimed to demonstrate that Israel can do business with key Arab states without having to compromise on the Palestinian issue and of course to marshal Arab state support in his campaign against Iran.

Saudi Arabia and the UAE, in particular, see Iran—not a seemingly intractable Palestinian issue—as their most pressing national security challenge and see Israel as a powerful partner in containing Tehran's regional designs. The partnership began to crystallize with the Obama administration's 2015 nuclear deal with Iran and the perception that Washington was opening the door to legitimizing the Islamic Republic as a potential regional partner.

One of the reasons the Israeli-Arab state *détente* has gained traction is because

it's homegrown—emerging from the perception of common threat. But the Trump administration picked up the ball and ran with it. Determined to reverse the policies of his predecessor on Iran and the peace process that had alienated both Israel and Saudi Arabia, Trump made both countries key to his Middle East policies. In my first meeting with Jared Kushner in 2017, he made it unmistakably clear that his father-in-law was determined to establish strategic relationships with both countries.

It was certainly no coincidence that the president's first foreign trip, in May 2017, was to Saudi Arabia, where, accompanied by a retinue of some of the biggest names in American business and finance, the president talked about Saudi investment, American jobs and billions in arms sales. Then it was on to Israel, where Trump became the first sitting president to pray at Jerusalem's Western Wall. That trip—planned by Jared Kushner—would also give rise to his close relationship with the Saudi king's son, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, known as MBS. A reckless and impulsive 30-something reformer, MBS would figure prominently in many disasters, from the war in Yemen to the kidnapping of the Lebanese prime minister, to the murder of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi, as well as in Kushner's plans to promote Middle East peacemaking.

At the core of that vision were efforts to promote Israeli-Arab state cooperation, both to cement a common front against Iran and to build leverage to pressure the Palestinians to come to the negotiating table. And the Gulf Arab states played the Israeli card for all it was worth. Convinced the road to Washington lay through Jerusalem, the Saudis in particular cozied up to the Trump administration, which refused to abandon them even after bin Salman's disastrous role in the murder of Jamal Khashoggi. For a few token appearances with the Israelis, such as the Warsaw Conference on Middle East Peace and Security in February 2019, where Netanyahu met with the Saudi foreign minister, Riyadh stayed on Trump's good side, as it had in low-keying the Saudi reaction to Trump's opening a U.S. Embassy in Jerusalem. And later that year in Manama, with Riyadh's permission, Bahrain hosted a U.S.-orchestrated economic conference that brought together Arab and Israeli representatives from the private sector to discuss the economic aspects of Trump's Vision for Middle East Peace.

Will the Israel-Arab state honeymoon last? The answer is probably yes, anchored as it is in self-interest.

The Iranian threat isn't going to disappear. The U.S.-Saudi relationship is going through a bad patch now over oil prices. But as long as the Saudis and Emiratis think it's in their interests to stay in Trump's favor, their cooperation will continue. And why shouldn't they? The Saudis have few friends in Washington other than the White House, which recently bypassed Congress, declaring a faux national emergency to facilitate billions of dollars in weapons sales to Saudi and the UAE. Positioning themselves as being good on Israel certainly can't hurt, though the talking points might not be as effective for a President Joe Biden who has labeled Saudi Arabia a pariah state.

As for Netanyahu, as long as he doesn't expect too much from his new Arab friends and doesn't break the bank by annexing wholesale the Jordan Valley and the whole West Bank (very unlikely), the Gulf Arabs will stay on board as they did when the U.S. Embassy opened in Jerusalem.

It ain't peace. But then again that was never in the cards. In a broken, angry, dysfunctional Middle East, who could ask for more?

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