



On August 13, 2020, the so-called “Abraham Agreement” was announced by United States President Donald Trump, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, and United Arab Emirates (UAE) President Khalifa bin Zayed Al Nahyan (known by the initials MBZ). Announced as an “historic peace deal,”¹ the three countries agreed to the full normalization of relations between the UAE and Israel.

What exactly did UAE and Israel agree to?

The final details are not yet confirmed, as several issues still have to be negotiated before the final agreement is signed. However, several key aspects were noted in the announcement:

- The UAE and Israel agreed to establish full bilateral economic and diplomatic ties, known as “normalization.” It was announced that delegations from the two countries would meet over the coming weeks to sign bilateral agreements regarding “investment, tourism, direct flights, security,” embassies, and a myriad of other “areas of mutual benefit.”
- The US, Israel and UAE would launch a “Strategic Agenda for the Middle East to expand diplomatic, trade, and security cooperation.”
- Israel would “suspend” its plans to annex portions of the West Bank to focus on normalization.
- The announcement affirmed the right of “all Muslims who come in peace,” including UAE citizens, to visit and pray at the Al Aqsa Mosque in East Jerusalem.²

Is this a peace deal?

No. Although the UAE-Israel agreement is often marketed as a “peace deal,” this is a misnomer. UAE will become only the third Arab country to recognize Israel, following Egypt which signed a peace treaty with Israel in 1979, and Jordan which signed a treaty in 1994. Unlike those countries, however, the UAE does not share a border with Israel, and the UAE and Israel have never been at war.

Importantly, Israel and the UAE have been quietly cultivating unofficial relations for years, including in defence cooperation, intelligence surveillance, and trade

in weapons.³ The recent agreement formalizes and builds upon these existing, yet surreptitious, relationships.

Why didn’t the UAE and Israel already have official relations?

The UAE, like most countries in the Arab world, has refused to enter into normalized relations with Israel since it was established in 1948, as a protest against the partition of Palestine. For decades, Arab states have insisted that normalization must be predicated upon a just resolution for the Palestinians. This was the case for the 2002 Arab Peace Initiative, led by Saudi Arabia, which insisted that a Palestinian state must be created before normalization could take place.⁴

The UAE-Israel deal contradicts this longstanding position, “decoupling” the Arab-Israel conflict from the Israel-Palestine conflict.⁵ The deal is widely recognized by the Israeli leadership as confirmation that they do not need to give up occupied territory, but that they can circumvent the issue while establishing relationships with Arab states.⁶

Following the announcement, the United States and Israel have hinted that other states may soon follow the UAE by entering into normalization agreements with Israel. US officials have been visiting countries including Bahrain, Oman, and Sudan, to try to generate support for future deals.⁷ As of September 1, 2020, there are 30 UN member states that do not recognize Israel.

Does the agreement put an end to Israel’s annexation plans?

No. Although the UAE has boasted that its deal has stopped Israel’s annexation plans and saved the two-state solution,⁸ what Israel has actually agreed to is a temporary “suspension” or pause on any formal announcement on annexation.

In fact, Netanyahu has repeatedly said that annexation remains on the table,⁹ and this has been echoed by both Israeli and US officials.¹⁰ At a fundamental level, Israel’s annexation plans remain consistent with Trump’s so-called “Deal of the Century,” which the US continues to promote as a resolution to the conflict.¹¹ For this reason, the Israelis could revive their annexation plans at any time.

Are there other motives behind this deal?

All three countries are interested in expanding military cooperation in the region, particularly to counterbalance the influence of Iran.¹² For its part, the UAE aspires to become a regional power,¹³ and in recent years has contributed to brutal military offensives in Afghanistan, Yemen and Libya, deploying air strikes and arming militias.¹⁴

Another major motivation for the deal is how it will boost arms sales. The UAE is a major purchaser of US weapons, on which it spends an estimated \$20b out of its annual defence budget of \$23b, and normalization is expected to provide Israel with greater access to the UAE market for arms.¹⁵ Importantly, the US has been wanting to sell F-35 fighter jets and armed drones to the UAE, but Israel has so far opposed any such deal on the grounds that it could erode its 'qualitative military edge.' The UAE has an understanding that the normalization deal will allow it to go ahead with its purchase of the F-35 jets, although Israel still opposes this.¹⁶

How has the international community reacted?

Many countries welcomed the UAE-Israel agreement (and the promised suspension of annexation), including Canada, the UK, Egypt, Bahrain, and Oman. Others, such as Iran, Turkey, and Qatar criticized it.

Civil society groups, activists, and academics have protested against the deal in the UAE, Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar, and Oman.¹⁷ State repression against those who criticize the deal has been reported in the UAE, Jordan, and Egypt.¹⁸

How have the Palestinians reacted?

Palestinians of all backgrounds expressed outrage over the UAE-Israel deal, as the UAE abandoned the longstanding principle that normalization can only occur if there is an end to Israel's oppression of Palestine. Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas called the deal a "betrayal of Jerusalem, Al-Aqsa and the Palestinian cause," and the Palestinian Authority recalled its ambassador to UAE.¹⁹ Hamas called the deal "a reward for the Israeli occupation's crimes," and a "stabbing in the back of our people."²⁰ Others have raised concerns that the deal could bring about changes to the status quo over access to the Temple Mount and Al-Aqsa Mosque, possibly triggering violence.²¹

Is Canada right to welcome the deal?

Canada welcomed the agreement as a "positive step toward peace and security in the region,"²² but this optimism is unfounded. The UAE-Israel agreement is a "peace deal" between countries never at war, which accelerates military spending and militarism in the Middle East. Moreover, it avoids the core issue of Israel's occupation of Palestine and lessens the incentive for Israel to respect Palestinian human rights. The UAE's opportunistic path is not likely to end division and conflict in the region and may in fact intensify and prolong it.

¹ Lahav Harkov and Omri Nahmias, "Israel, UAE reach historic peace deal: 'We can make a wonderful future'" *Jerusalem Post*, August 14, 2020.

² Haaretz, "'Historic Diplomatic Breakthrough': Read the Full Statement on Israel-UAE Agreement," August 13, 2020.

³ Ian Black, "Just Below the Surface: Israel, the Arab Gulf States and the Limits of Cooperation," *LSE Middle East Centre Report*, March 2019, pp. 12-16.

⁴ Dana El Kurd, "Palestinians are a side note in the UAE-Israel political charade," *+972 Magazine*, August 27, 2020.

⁵ Anshel Pfeffer, "Don't Compare MBZ and Bibi to Sadat and Begin – the UAE-Israel Deal Is Much Bigger Than Peace," *Haaretz*, August 17, 2020.

⁶ *Times of Israel*, "Full text. Netanyahu on why UAE deal is different: Palestinians lost their veto," August 16, 2020.

⁷ Tovah Lazaroff, "Pompeo ends Middle East tour with no further peace declarations," *Jerusalem Post*, August 27, 2020.

⁸ *Reuters*, "UAE says deal was done to manage threat annexation posed to two-state solution," August 13, 2020.

⁹ Ncnaa Liphshiz, "Netanyahu says West Bank annexation 'remains on the table' following Israel-UAE agreement," *Jewish Telegraphic Agency*, August 14, 2020; Tova Lazaroff, "Netanyahu pledges annexation, plans to open school year in a settlement," *Jerusalem Post*, August 31, 2020.

¹⁰ Noa Landau, "After Netanyahu Commits to Future Annexation, Trump Says It's 'Now Off the Table,'" *Haaretz*, August 13, 2020; *Times of Israel*, "Israel says annexation still going ahead, just suspended for a little while," August 13, 2020.

¹¹ For more information see CJPME Factsheet No. 218, *The Trump Plan for the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict*, February 2020.

¹² *Israel Hayom*, "UAE, Israeli defense ministers pledge cooperation," August 26, 2020; Ian Black, "Just Below the Surface: Israel, the Arab Gulf States and the Limits of Cooperation," *LSE Middle East Centre Report*, March 2019, pp. 12-16.

¹³ Dana El Kurd, "Palestinians are a side note in the UAE-Israel political charade," *+972 Magazine*, August 27, 2020.

¹⁴ Jason Pack, "The Israel-UAE Deal Won't Bring Peace, but It Will Prolong the War in Libya" *Foreign Affairs*, August 21, 2020; David Kirkpatrick, "The Most Powerful Arab Ruler Isn't M.B.S. It's M.B.Z." *New York Times*, June 2, 2019.

¹⁵ Hagai Amit, "The Real Deal for Israel and the UAE is Weapons," *Haaretz*, August 17, 2020.

¹⁶ Neri Zilber, "Peace for Warplanes?" *Foreign Policy*, August 31, 2020.

¹⁷ Tamara Nassar, "'Silent Majority' rejects Gulf ties with Israel," *Electronic Intifada*, August 19, 2020.

¹⁸ *Al Bawaba*, "'Help Us Find Critics': UAE Smart App Allows Reporting Residents Who Tweet Against Normalization With Israel," August 17, 2020; *Times of Israel*, "Rights groups urge release of Jordanian jailed over cartoon on Israel-UAE deal," August 28, 2020; *Al-Monitor*, "Egyptian news media warned not to criticize UAE-Israel deal," August 27, 2020.

¹⁹ Rami Ayyub, "Palestinians warn Israel-UAE deal imperils Jerusalem's Al-Aqsa mosque," *Reuters*, August 14, 2020.

²⁰ Jack Khoury and Noa Landau, "Palestinians Slam 'Betrayal' by UAE in Deal With Israel: 'Reward of the Occupation's Crimes'" *Haaretz*, August 13, 2020.

²¹ Nadda Osman, "Israel-UAE deal: Normalisation raises concern over change in status of Al-Aqsa – Report," *Middle East Eye*, August 30, 2020.

²² Levon Sevunts, "Canada welcomes normalization of relations between Israel and U.A.E." *Radio Canada International*, August 14, 2020.