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**The United Arab Emirates: Proactive in War and Peace**

**Yoel Guzansky**

**On Thursday, August 13, 2020, the United States, Israel, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) issued a joint official announcement that Israel and UAE would embark on a political process that will culminate in the full normalization of relations. The announcement stated that delegations from Israel and the UAE will meet to reach agreement in various areas in order to build substantive relations. There are various possible motives behind the dramatic step of the UAE, given the changes in its strategic environment.**

The timing of the announcement of normalization of relations between Israel and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) came as a surprise to many people, even though the measure is consistent with the gradual progress in bilateral relations in recent years. The UAE's action is a brave demonstration of leadership by its acting leader, Abu Dhabi Crown Prince Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed. Not only did he decide to make his country's relations with Israel public; he also aspires to expand those relations. These relations have developed in a number of sometimes overlapping channels: security-intelligence, economic-trade, and a public channel, which in recent years included an interfaith dialogue that the UAE helped sponsor. Together with Jordan's King Abdullah, bin Zayed headed the Arab bloc publicly opposing Israel's plan to apply sovereignty in the West Bank. It is possible that without Israeli sovereignty intentions, the normalization process would not have gotten underway at the present time.

Over the years, the Arab countries generally adhered to the terms of the Arab Peace Initiative, whereby forging relations with Israel depended on an overall peace agreement between Israel and the Palestinians. In recent years, Israel has prioritized strengthened relations with the Arab countries over the political process with the Palestinians, while the Palestinians have tried to prevent elements of normalization between Israel and the Gulf states in order to retain normalization as a bargaining chip against Israel. The attitude of the Gulf states to Israel, however, has not remained static, and as it changed over time, the principles of the Arab Peace Initiative weakened. There are countries, such as Kuwait, that still adhere to the original terms and object to the action taken by UAE, which has clearly charted a different course. In the past two years, UAE was the only Gulf state to play the Israeli national anthem in sports competitions. Israeli ministers

visited the country, a chief rabbi was appointed for the Jewish community in Dubai, Israel was invited to participate in Expo 2020 in Dubai (postponed because of the coronavirus), Abu Dhabi sent aid for combating the coronavirus to the West Bank (rejected by the Palestinian Authority because it was sent via Israel), the UAE Ambassador to the United States published an article in an Israeli newspaper, and Israel and UAE signed an agreement to cooperate in the struggle against the coronavirus.

In the past, the UAE exhibited restraint and moderation in its foreign relations, and let other states take the lead. Today, however, it is a bold force responsible for many of the regional changes, and a key player in many arenas – no less, and sometimes more, than Saudi Arabia, its neighbor and partner. Its small army, the best trained and equipped military force in the Arab world, is involved in distant theaters: Yemen, Libya, and Afghanistan. The ratio between the UAE's small population (only one million of its nine million residents are citizens) and the huge oil reserves in its territory (approximately 100 billion proven barrels of oil) make it one of the world's wealthiest countries in terms of per capita GDP. This wealth has helped the federation, which will soon celebrate the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of its independence, put itself at the head of the Arab world in many spheres, including civilian nuclear development, defense industry, cybersecurity, and space research.

In the UAE, the agreement with Israel is portrayed as a diplomatic victory intended to help the Palestinians, and as a required payment for arresting Israel's plan to apply sovereignty in the West Bank. According to the federation, willingness to agree to normalization with Israel not only preserves the relevance of the two-state solution, but also contributes to stability in the Middle East. Bin Zayed believes that the price he will pay for the move in the domestic theater, which still shows no great friendliness toward Israel, is outweighed by what he has achieved. Polls conducted in recent years in the UAE indicate that public opinion is concerned mainly about the threat from Iran, and ranks the Palestinian issue at the bottom of its concerns.

For UAE, the important advantage of its action is not confined to the halt of the annexation in the West Bank and the dividends that may be forthcoming from closer ties with Israel, which were already quite well advanced. Bin Zayed hopes that the anticipated agreement will improve the UAE's image, tarnished mainly because of its military involvement in Yemen and its cooperation with Saudi Crown Prince and acting ruler Mohammed bin Salman, some of whose actions have damaged Riyadh's status and influence.

More importantly, bin Zayed hopes that his act will strengthen the UAE's relations with the United States, primarily in security matters, and provide something of an achievement

to President Trump, who hopes to score important points in his reelection campaign. This probably explains the timing of bin Zayed's official recognition of Israel. Doubt has increased in recent years among UAE leadership about the continuation of the US commitment to the federation's security. It is possible that as part of the emerging agreement with Israel, tacit understandings were also reached between the United States and UAE, including various guarantees and access to advanced arms that have not yet been supplied to the UAE. The UAE has pressured Washington in recent years to supply it with advanced platforms, including the advanced F-35 fighter jet; the only country in the region that has received it thus far is Israel. If this advanced warplane is indeed sold to UAE, it is liable to erode Israel's qualitative military edge, and accelerate the arms race in the region.

The movement in relations between Israel and the UAE is not likely to improve coordination and cooperation between them with respect to Iran, because the two countries are already closely aligned in this respect. On the contrary; some matters are best left unstated, if only because the agreement is liable to expose the UAE to Iranian and Turkish criticism, and to augment Iran's motivation to take action detrimental to the UAE (while maintaining proper trade relations between Dubai and Iran – a basic mutual interest). A future agreement to introduce full diplomatic relations between the UAE and Israel, however, which is still a long way in the future, will expand and facilitate economic and trade cooperation between Israel and the UAE.

The action taken by bin Zayed will have no negative effect on the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, which is already deadlocked, in part because of the recalcitrant positions taken by the Palestinians. At the same time, paradoxically, some believe that a regional normalization process is likely to help promote a settlement between Israel and the Palestinians, because the UAE deviation from the Arab consensus may well exert pressure on the Palestinians to show flexibility and agreement to a political compromise, lest other countries in the region preempt them by jumping on the peace bandwagon, thereby aggravating the Palestinian isolation.

What the UAE has done might enable additional countries in the Arab world to follow in its footsteps, therefore further eroding the convention that any normalization with Israel is contingent on Palestinian consent. The welcome accorded to the UAE step by Bahrain and Oman, issued after Egypt supported it, is perhaps evidence of their attitude in the matter. Special attention should be paid to Saudi Arabia. It is likely that bin Salman, who appears to have been aware of the move in advance, prefers to assess the range of responses, and to consider whether and under which conditions to make Riyadh's relations with Israel public. In the first reaction from Riyadh, the Saudi Foreign Ministry,

while avoiding direct reference to the Emirati move said that the kingdom is still committed to peace on the basis of the Arab Peace Initiative.

The importance of the announcement of normalization in relations between Israel and the UAE is primarily diplomatic and economic, because security and political cooperation between the two countries, which have similar views of the strategic environment, is already quite close. Both countries are alarmed about the ambitions of Iran and Turkey to extend and expand their influence in the Arab world. Looking ahead, if a peace agreement between Israel and the UAE is signed, it is likely to be a warmer peace than Israel has had with its neighbors, Egypt and Jordan, if only because there is no territorial dispute between them, and no bad blood between either the elites or the two peoples.

Many regard the UAE as a significant influence on the direction of regional developments at the current time, perhaps more than any other Arab country. At the same time, some of the regional "projects" in which it has been involved in recent years – the boycott of Qatar, the war in Yemen, and the war in Libya – have not been very successful. It appears that the UAE leadership sought a major achievement that would establish its status as a regional leader. Time will tell whether it will also be able, by itself or as part of a regional bloc, to also restore the Israeli-Palestinian peace process to the top of the Middle East agenda.