



The First Months of Israel-UAE Peace: Israel's Perspective on the Abraham Accords

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A. Introduction

In the few months that have passed since the signing of the historical Abraham Accords, Israel and the UAE have opened embassies and exchanged ambassadors, launched direct flights between Tel Aviv and Abu Dhabi, hosted dozens of businesses, cultural and academic delegations (among them a high-ranking Emirati delegation led by the UAE ministers of finance and economy), and facilitated visits of thousands of Israeli tourists to Dubai. Universities and think tanks from both countries have established connections, and news outlets have launched different forms of cooperation. Israel, the UAE, and the US set an investment fund worth 3 billion USD (the fund is not operational yet) and banks on both sides established agreements on financial services.

The scope of activity between the two countries is impressive, and it seems that in case of Israel and the UAE, the seeds of peace have fallen on fertile ground, mainly due to high level of economic development and mutual geopolitical interests and concerns, such as the Iranian threat (although both sides evaluate and treat it differently). Today, it is almost impossible to imagine that just a few years ago Israeli athletes were only allowed to compete in the UAE if they agreed to participate without their national flag or national anthem sung at the closing ceremony.

Why is it that the peace between Israel and the UAE appears to be such a stark contrast from previous peace agreements that Israel has signed with other Arab countries? Several factors have facilitated the newly established relationship: the positive image of the UAE in Israel; the lack of past hostilities, casualties, and territorial demands between the two countries; the unofficial ties forged long before the official recognition; the many mutual interests that seem to be aligned together; and the right timing that allowed for this bold and important development.

Will the parties be able to maintain a similar level of enthusiasm also when the honeymoon stage passes? How will the two countries deal with various regional and international challenges? This paper presents an Israeli perspective on the first months of the relationship between Israel and UAE, and looks at prospects for the near future of these relations.

B. Historical Background

Immediately after the signing of the Oslo accords in 1993, the UAE refrained from normalizing relations with Israel. Unlike Oman and Qatar, the Emirates did not open a representative office in Tel Aviv. However, Israel and the UAE did maintain some volume of

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relations in the areas of trade and defense.¹ These relations continued well into the 2000s despite the Arab League resolutions – within the context of the second intifada – which called for Arab states to end both open and secret relations with the Jewish state and despite the anti-Israeli campaigns that ran in the Arab media at the time.² Israeli websites, as well as telephone lines, were blocked in the UAE, yet between 2003 and 2020 Israeli delegations and ministers visited the UAE (some participated in the international events, conferences and sporting events that took part in Dubai and Abu Dhabi). However, concurrent to the development and growth of these unofficial relations, some public negative events, such as the assassination of Hamas operative Mahmoud al-Mabhouh in hotel in Dubai in 2010, also occurred. This dramatic event had quite a negative effect on the development of relations between the countries.

In 2009 Israeli tennis player Shahar Peer was denied an Emirati entry visa,³ while other Israeli athletes were forced to participate under international, rather than Israeli, symbols and the Israeli anthem was not played.⁴ The last such case took place in 2017, merely four years ago. This exemplifies how quickly the attitudes, ideologies, and traditions have changed. During these touch-and-go years, Israeli relations with the UAE often took one step forward and two steps back. When an Israeli diplomatic mission to the International Renewable Energy Agency in Abu Dhabi was opened in November 2015, the Emirati authorities declared that “this move has nothing to do with normalization of relations with Israel”. However, by 2017 the two countries had participated together in a Greek Air Force exercise,⁵ and in 2018 and 2019 a few official visits by Israeli ministers took place and were widely covered by the Emirati and Israeli press.⁶

C. The Path to an Agreement

Israel-UAE relations developed significantly in the second decade of the 21st century, including in the fields of diplomacy, trade, interreligious dialogue, defense and cyber security. However, even at the beginning of 2020, few Israeli experts assumed that Abu Dhabi would finalize the details of an agreement and join the “normalizers” club with Israel.

While relations between the two states warmed by the day, paradoxically it was the Israeli intention to pursue in 2020 annexation of the Jordan Valley and possibly other parts of West Bank that eventually led the way for rapprochement. The UAE ambassador to the US Yusuf al-Otaiba wrote an article in the Israeli media explicitly mentioning the possibility of normalization of relations between the two states, if Israel chose to halt annexation. In reality, no serious preparations indicated that annexation will actually be implemented by July 1, 2020 (the official date mentioned by Netanyahu as when the process of annexation would begin⁷). There were no maps, figures or even an outline of this significant and likely reality changing event. Eventually, Netanyahu’s close aid, Minister of Water and Higher Education Ze’ev Elkin, claimed that annexation was not imminent,⁸ and several weeks later – on August 13, 2020 – US President Donald Trump announced that the UAE was ready to normalize

¹ [“Establishing Relations with the Emirates: Business Opportunities and Great Commercial Potential,”](#) *Calcalist*, August 13, 2020.

² [“A tumultuous relationship,”](#) *Globes*, October 26, 2000.

³ [“Israel’s Shahar Peer denied visa for Dubai Tennis Championships,”](#) *The Telegraph*, February 15, 2009.

⁴ [“Israeli judoka wins gold in UAE but not under Israel flag,”](#) *AP News*, October 27, 2017.

⁵ [“Israel, UAE to fly together in Greek air force exercise,”](#) *Times of Israel*, 27 March 2017.

⁶ [“In first, Israeli minister makes state visit to Grand Mosque in Abu Dhabi,”](#) *Times of Israel*, October 29, 2018.

⁷ [“Netanyahu vows all settlements will be annexed July 1, but other lands may wait,”](#) *Times* March 27, 2017 of *Israel*, June 8, 2020.

⁸ [“Major West Bank annexation move not imminent, Israeli minister signals,”](#) *Reuters*, June 30, 2020.

relations with Israel.⁹ Some pundits in Israel debated whether Netanyahu meant to actually go along with annexation, whether it was merely a political tool to mobilize his electoral base, or whether it was a distraction designed to create a sense of urgency and to speed up normalization agreements. In any case, Netanyahu's eventual decision to suspend annexation was extremely popular in Israel, as the vast majority of Israelis preferred a peace deal with Emirates over annexation.¹⁰

D. How is the UAE Perceived by Israelis?

Many Israelis were hoping and wishing for this moment long before the UAE announced that it would normalize relations with Israel. The cooperation between the two countries developed rapidly during the last decade as leaders and businessmen on both sides discovered mutual interests in defense, high-tech, innovation, cyber, science, and development (some business activity was maintained even earlier – during the 2000s). According to some experts, the trade between Israel and UAE was estimated at billions of dollars prior to the normalization of ties.¹¹ Israelis with dual citizenship had visited Dubai and returned spreading the news about a gleaming and sophisticated city in the desert, and in opinion polls Israelis repeatedly chose the UAE as their top, and at the time, only, destination to travel to in the Middle East.¹²

Israeli researchers of the Middle East also followed developments in the UAE closely, marking its achievements and progress, from significant investment in science and high-tech to establishing a center for the three Abrahamic religions and taking a leading role in the regional arena. The UAE's economic and scientific achievements are vastly highlighted in the Israeli press. When the UAE announced its intention to normalize relations with Israel, Israeli reporters flocked to Dubai and brought home enthusiastic reports about Dubai and Abu Dhabi. The coverage of the UAE was and to this day remains mainly positive, despite the failed acquisition of the Beitar Yerushalaim¹³ football club by an Emirati businessman and some reports that shed light on the darker side of Dubai's night life.¹⁴

E. A Valuable Regional Security Partner

Not only is the UAE perceived as a developed and successful country which is highly attractive for tourists, but it is also seen as a natural ally of Israel in the Middle East, along with the other moderate Sunni countries, vis-à-vis Iran, radical Islamist movements, and terror organizations.¹⁵ The UAE's decision to normalize relations with Israel and its criticism of the Palestinian leadership is seen in Israel as an attempt to break away from the traditional Arab support of the Palestinians (a development highlighted many times by Netanyahu in speeches at the Knesset, live Facebook broadcasts and media interviews, coinciding with his agenda of disconnecting the normalization of relations with Arab states from the Palestinian track).

⁹ ["Trump announces "historic" peace agreement between Israel and UAE via Twitter,"](#) *Calcalist Tech*, August 13, 2020.

¹⁰ ["Nearly 80% of the public preferred the agreement with the Emirates over the application of sovereignty,"](#) *Mako*, August 16, 2020.

¹¹ ["Cyber, security and water projects: Israelis already operating in the Emirates,"](#) *Calcalist*, August 16, 2020.

¹² Dr. Moran Zaga, ["Cooperation between Israel and the United Arab Emirates in 2019: From political warming to civil rapprochement,"](#) *The Mitvim Institute*, January 2020.

¹³ ["Beitar Jerusalem is coming to terms with the situation: the Ben Khalifa deal is very far away,"](#) *Walla Sports*, January 24, 2021.

¹⁴ ["The Prostitution Industry in the Emirates - and the Israeli side,"](#) *Kan News*, December 19, 2020.

¹⁵ ["Israel is our partner in the war on terror,"](#) *Calcalist*, November 20, 2020.

Israel clearly sees in the Abraham Accords and in the normalization processes with UAE, Bahrain, Morocco and Sudan a path towards its acceptance in the broader Middle East, a significant asset to its diplomacy, and an opportunity to establish new partnerships towards a safer and more stable regional environment. This assumption is now supported by various media reports regarding a possible broad defense treaty that will include a few Arab and Western countries, along Israel.¹⁶

Additionally, the right wing in Israel also perceives the Abraham Accords as an exemption from pursuing a just and viable solution for the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Although the official Emirati position contradicts this conviction, Netanyahu has said time and again that “the circumstances have changed in the Arab [world] and there is no need to wait for progress on the Palestinian track to normalize relations with the moderate Arab states”.¹⁷

In this context, normalization with the UAE, Bahrain, Sudan and Morocco is also labelled by Netanyahu and his aides as “the first peace in exchange for peace”, implying that Israel did not have to pay any price in land or territory for it, unlike previous agreements with Egypt and the Palestinians. Furthermore, peace with Jordan was only possible due to progress on the Palestinian track. Because there were no territorial demands in this case and the Abraham Accords were not linked to the Palestinian track, it allowed Netanyahu to brand them as the only “peace for peace” treaties in Israel’s history.¹⁸

The official Emirati position is that the treaties were possible only due to Israeli agreement to halt its annexation intentions, and that the Abraham Accords stopped Israel from implementing this plan. However, the Israeli government and pro-government media highlighted other aspects of this development, stressing the US involvement, the changing realities in the Arab world, the lack of solidarity among Palestinians, and the Arab desire to partner with the strong country in the region.¹⁹

F. First Months of Achievements

During the first months that followed the Israel-UAE agreement, bilateral relations have truly flourished. By August 15, 2020, two days after the announcement on the normalization by Trump, the first economic deal was officially signed between Israeli and Emirati companies.²⁰ By August 31, the first direct flight from Ben-Gurion airport took off to Abu Dhabi and flew in Saudi Arabia airspace. Israel exempted Emirati citizens from obtaining a visa to Israel, following a similar Emirati decision (which implementation was later postponed by a few months).²¹

A memorandum of understanding (MoU) between the Weizmann Institute of Science in Israel and the Mohamed bin Zayed University of Artificial Intelligence (MBZUAI) in the United Arab Emirates was signed by September 13,²² while in beginning of 2021 UAE’s Zulekha Hospital and Israel’s Health Plus sign agreement to promote medical tourism.

¹⁶ [“Gantz: Israel is working to establish a regional security alliance with Gulf states,”](#) *Kan News*, March 2, 2021.

¹⁷ Dr. Yuval Ben-Zimran [“The Netanyahu government’s attempt to sever Israel-Arab relations from the Israeli-Palestinian peace process,”](#) *The Mitvim Institute*, February, 2018.

¹⁸ [“Netanyahu’s ‘Brilliant’ Mideast Peace Strategy Has a Big Problem,”](#) *Haaretz*, September 13, 2020.

¹⁹ [“Netanyahu: ‘Relations with Arab countries are strong because they do not depend on the whims of the Palestinians’,”](#) *Maariv*, December 16, 2018.

²⁰ [“The First Overt Deal with a Gulf company,”](#) *Mako*, August 15, 2020.

²¹ [“UAE approves visa exemption agreement with Israel, Foreign Ministry says,”](#) *The Times of Israel*, January 13, 2021.

²² [“The Weizmann Institute of Science and Mohamed bin Zayed University in the UAE to Collaborate on Artificial Intelligence Research,”](#) *Weizmann Institute of Science*, 13 September 2020.

By October 12, the first ship sailed from the UAE to embark in Haifa port. The agreement on direct flights between the two countries became effective by the end of October, and almost on the same day the US-UAE-Israel “Abraham Fund” was established. According to then-US ambassador to Israel Friedman, “the fund will mobilize more than 3 billion USD in private sector-led investment and development initiatives to promote regional economic cooperation and prosperity in the Middle East and beyond.” Additionally, in October, Israel and the UAE began talks over an oil pipeline linking the Red Sea with the Mediterranean, the “Red-Med”.²³ In November and December, thousands of Israeli tourists used the opportunity to visit Dubai. The demand was immense, and it only stopped due to a new outbreak of Covid-19 in Israel.

The first months were also full of diplomatic activities. By October 6, the ministers of foreign affairs, Gabi Ashkenazi and Abdullah Bin Zayed, met in Berlin and jointly visited the Holocaust Memorial.²⁴ The first high-ranking Emirati business delegation arrived in Israel on November 1, and by the end of January 2021, Israel inaugurated its embassy and consulate in Abu Dhabi and Dubai, and the first official Israeli envoy, Ambassador Eitan Na’eh, took his post. After a month, the Emirati Ambassador Muhammad al-Khaja presented his credentials to President Reuven Rivlin.²⁵

However, the planned official visit of Netanyahu to the UAE has yet to happen, and in fact was postponed four times due to scheduling issues, Covid-19 outbreaks, and lockdowns in Israel. For this reason, no Israeli ministers have visited the UAE (Netanyahu did not allow that, insisting that he should be the first one to pay an official visit), yet many of them have established relations with their counterparts, and their respective ministries are developing close ties with each other. Soon after the last attempt of Netanyahu to visit Abu Dhabi had failed due to a recent crisis with Amman, Emirati officials had made it clear that they are not interested in pre-elections visit of Israeli prime minister and “will not be a part of any internal electioneering in Israel, now or ever”.²⁶ This was the first significant rift between Israel and the UAE since the signing of Abraham Accords and it had also resulted in the suspension of plans for a summit at which Abu Dhabi were to host Netanyahu, senior US officials and the heads of Arab states that have normalized relations with Israel.²⁷ It is important to underline that this first crisis was not caused by policy issues or disagreements between the party, but merely by political whims of Netanyahu.

Given the delicate diplomatic work carried out over the last two decades by the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the positive attitude towards the UAE in Israel, and the variety of mutual interests and goals, it is no wonder that the first months of Israel-UAE normalization can easily be described as a honeymoon. The big question is how these relations will continue to develop after this honeymoon ends. With the change in American leadership, the JCPOA back on the table, Iran getting bolder, and the Palestinian elections nearing, how will Israel and the UAE meet these common challenges, and how might these challenges shape the future of bilateral relationship?

²³ [“Israel and UAE Eye Pipeline Linking Red and Mediterranean Seas,”](#) *Rigzone via Bloomberg*, October 20, 2020.

²⁴ [“‘Never again,’ UAE’s top diplomat declares at Holocaust memorial with Ashkenazi,”](#) *Times of Israel*, October 6, 2020.

²⁵ [“First-ever UAE ambassador to Israel presents credentials,”](#) *The Jerusalem Post*, March 1, 2021.

²⁶ Anwar Gargash, [Twitter page](#), 17 March 2021.

²⁷ [“Israel-US summit amid anger at PM’s electioneering,”](#) *Times of Israel*, March 18, 2021.

G. Where Do We Go from Here?

The enthusiasm regarding the Abraham Accords in Israel is unprecedented, and the expectations of promoting bilateral relations, tourism, trade, science, and investments are even higher. Israeli tour operators expect that Dubai will turn into one of the hottest tourism destinations as soon as flights resume and Covid-19 restrictions are lifted. In early February 2021, one of the leading tour operators told Israeli KAN radio corporation: “The UAE in 2021 is what Turkey used to be in the 1990’s, when millions of Israeli tourists flocked to that destination and enjoyed its proximity and hospitality.” Concurrently, the Israeli tourism market is looking forward to incoming tourism from the UAE. This could boost the tourism sector in Jerusalem, specifically in East Jerusalem, as many believe that the Emirati tourism to Israel will look at high-end and luxury options.

The expectation is that the flourishing high-tech sphere in Israel will also benefit from new partnerships and investments.²⁸ A few Israeli delegations representing the industry already visited Dubai and Abu Dhabi, and many of them in fact have a previous record of covert cooperation. It is not clear as of now what the scope of influence of the economic decline caused by Covid-19 will be on the potential Emirati investments in Israeli startups and the high-tech industry. Since early 2000s the defense industry had developed ties with Emirati counterparts, and during the last decade defense-related sales increased steadily. It is expected that in the normalization era, the Israeli defense industry will try to increase its cooperation with the UAE even more as bureaucratic obstacles are now removed and mutual perceptions have improved.

At the same time, along with trade, high-tech, and tourism, Israel is also looking at the UAE as a geopolitical partner and a possible ally in its fight against Iranian hegemony in the region, its nuclear dossier, radical Islam, and in its quest to stabilize the situation regarding the Palestinian Authority and the Gaza Strip.

The planned parliamentary and presidential elections in the Palestinian Authority on May 22 and July 31, 2021, as well as the possible tensions that might flare up between Israel and the Palestinian Authority, will likely become the first test for the new Israeli-Emirati relations. The UAE openly expressed criticism towards the current Palestinian leadership,²⁹ but at the same time Abu Dhabi officially supports the Arab Peace Initiative and the two-state solution. Although some Israeli decision makers would like to see more Emirati involvement in Palestinian affairs, in both the West Bank and Gaza Strip, for now it seems that Abu Dhabi is not in a rush to increase its engagement or to serve as a mediator between Jerusalem and Ramallah. In fact, it was recently reported that the UAE, along with Bahrain, massively cut financial aid to the Palestinian Authority immediately after the Abraham Accords were signed.³⁰

Will Abu Dhabi become a mediator and a bridge between Israel and other Arab states? The Israeli Ministry of Economy is already working on several joint economic initiatives that will include both Jordan and the UAE. This kind of cooperation could possibly reignite Israel-Jordan relations, which are of utmost importance to regional stability. Of course, there is also hope that the UAE will gently push more countries in the Middle East towards normalization with Israel – a move that might be beneficial to all parties involved. Oman and Saudi Arabia have signaled that they were not interested to speed up normalization with

²⁸ [“UAE-Israel ties: High-tech market beckons investors,”](#) *Khaleej Times*, January 24, 2021.

²⁹ [“Top UAE official laments PA’s ingratitude after Abbas envoy rants on Israel ties,”](#) *Times of Israel*, October 13, 2020.

³⁰ [“UAE massively cut aid to Palestinians after normalization with Israel,”](#) *Times of Israel*, February 5, 2021.

Israel, although Israelis are hopeful that the UAE will use its leverage to incorporate more countries into the emerging new regional architecture. Israel supported the UAE bid to join the Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum (EMGF) as an observer. This bid was blocked after the PA used its veto power to block it, due to the UAE's normalization with Israel.³¹

It appears that Israel is looking for cooperation with the UAE on another critical front – the Iranian nuclear deal. Just like Israel, the UAE enthusiastically supported the American withdrawal from JCPOA in 2018 and recently mentioned during a phone conversation with Ashkenazi that “the UAE and Bahrain need a unified voice with Israel on Iranian nukes and missile program”.³² Nowadays, when it is clear that the new American administration is searching ways to rekindle negotiations with Tehran, it is possible that the UAE, Israel and other Gulf states will speak in one voice to raise their concerns and fears. However, the differences between the Israeli and Emirati positions must also be clearly outlined to prevent future misunderstandings. While Israel considers Iran its mortal enemy and sees it as a significant threat to its security, the UAE looks at Iran as an uneasy neighbor that it must engage with.³³ This difference sometimes comes as a surprise to Israeli interlocutors, as they tend to believe that Iran is as large of a threat and an implacable enemy to the UAE as it is to Israel, overlooking the fact that there are vast economic relations between Iran and the UAE.

For now, it seems that Israel and the UAE were able to move quickly and effectively to cement the peace treaty that was signed in September 2020, and to act on it immediately with real substance. Although this peace treaty was not the first between Israel and its Arab neighbors, it is already becoming the warmest. Some bumps along the way are likely unavoidable, from Israeli tourists' difficulty to adjust to Emirati cultural codes, disagreements over foreign policy issues relating to Iran or the Palestinians, or attempts by Netanyahu to exploit the relations for the sake of his personal political goals. Despite these potential setbacks, however, Israel is determined to make its strategically important relationship with the UAE a success, and there is little doubt that the next months of normalization will also be packed with diplomatic, business, scientific and cultural activities.

³¹ [“Palestinian Authority Vetoes UAE Bid to Join Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum: Reports,”](#) *The New Arab*, March 10, 2021. The EMGF admits members by unanimous decisions only, causing the UAE's bid for observer status to be rejected.

³² [“UAE, Bahrain: We need ‘unified voice’ with Israel on Iran’s missiles, nukes,”](#) *Times of Israel*, January 26, 2021.

³³ [“Gargash: We only want Iran as normal neighbor,”](#) *Gulf News*, September 29, 2019.