

Israel-UAE Cooperation in 2019: Warming Relations, Also in Civilian Affairs

Dr. Moran Zaga*

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A. Introduction

The relations between the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Israel are primarily characterized by mutual interest and cautious rapprochement steps. The rapprochement can be attributed to the pragmatic character of the two states and their shared interests, including, inter alia, opposition to the Iranian nuclear program, opposing religious extremism, regional trade, modernization processes, handling similar environmental issues, and participation in global events and projects. The cautious approach and the limitations in these relations derive mainly from the UAE's avoidance of official normalization with Israel due to the latter's conduct regarding the Palestinian issue.

[A research paper](#) that was written on the subject in 2018, in the framework of a Mitvim Institute project on the unfulfilled potential of Israel's relations with Arab states, outlined how the UAE and Israel cooperate in four central areas: diplomacy, security, economy, and civilian affairs. The paper concluded that, at the date of its publication, there was a large and diverse array of partnerships in the economic sector. The paper also pointed to the fact that most of these partnerships are founded on ad hoc interests and temporary opportunities, and therefore the relationship between the countries cannot be described as consistent or deep. The majority of these collaborations are characterized by secrecy, due to the lack of formal relations or normalization between the UAE and Israel. At the same time, collaborations that take place in international platforms benefit from a higher level of legitimacy and exposure. Examples of this include the joint air force exercises of the two countries together with Greece, Italy, and the US; Israeli athletes' participation in sporting events that take place in the UAE; and the gatherings of statespersons in various international fora that take place in the UAE. Most of these collaborations stem from the UAE's desire to expand its role in the international community, and its wish to serve as a hub for international events and conferences. Within this framework, relations between the UAE and Israel have been tested a number of times in recent years, and were eventually strengthened, following the gradual removal of obstacles by the Emiratis.

In 2019, a series of events sharpened the UAE's focus and priorities: the withdrawal of its forces from Yemen and its efforts to stabilize Yemen's political system; its involvement in multiple regions, such as Libya and the Horn of Africa; the rising tensions around violent events in the Gulf and the diplomatic measures that the UAE took to pacify Iran; the ongoing crisis with Qatar; and the UAE's focus on domestic issues, such as the Federal National Council's elections and efforts to expand local workforce in the labor market. These changes

* Dr. Moran Zaga is a Policy Fellow at the Mitvim Institute and a Research Fellow at the Chaikin Chair for Geostrategy at the University of Haifa.

of focus led, inter alia, to the marginalization of the Palestinian issue in the UAE's foreign affairs during the last year. The UAE's involvement in the Palestinian arena was, in the last year, rather distant and symbolic, with continued [humanitarian aid](#) via UNRWA and the support of Mohammad Dahlan (believed to be a protege of Mohammed bin Zayed and the UAE's main channel to the Palestinians). Additionally, the enduring participation of the Palestinian Nusseibeh family in senior positions in the UAE (Zaki Nusseibeh as a government minister, and his daughter Lana Nusseibeh as Permanent Representative to the UN) serves as another manifestation of the UAE's solidarity with the Palestinians, though in their own territory.

The rather marginalization of the Palestinian issue was also manifested in a significant decline in statements of support for the Palestinian cause, and in decreased concrete involvement (or involvement attempts) in this arena by the UAE. The extent of the UAE's support and commitment to the national struggle of the Palestinians is in dispute between researchers and policymakers. Though the decline in the UAE's active involvement in the Palestinian issue does not necessarily attest to a decline in its commitment to the Palestinians. It may be attributed to its inability to exert influence in the Palestinian arena or to the increasing rapprochement between the UAE and Israel. The first aspect can be linked to the important role of Qatar and Egypt in the Gaza Strip, which restricts Dahlan and the UAE's ability to exert influence in this arena except in [unique cases](#), such as the months following the Qatar crisis in June 2017.

Turning to the second aspect, simultaneously and in contrast with moving away from the Palestinian arena, the UAE has shown greater openness to Israel and Israeli and Jewish audiences this past year. 2019 was characterized by improved informal relations between the countries, and these collaborations increased and became more diverse. The UAE's decision to allow Israel to participate in Expo 2020 starting October of this year has become the driving force in shaping direct relations between the countries, and continues to shape them in various areas.

This paper examines existing cooperation between Israel and the UAE, and the changes that have taken place in the relations throughout 2019. The paper assesses these changes in four main areas: diplomacy, security, economy and civilian affairs, and briefly describes the main developments in each area in order to point to common denominators and indicate key trends.

B. Cooperation Between Israel and the UAE

Relations between Israel and the UAE can be divided into two categories: those that take place in a wider international context, and those that take place in a direct bilateral framework. The first category is mostly public and will be expanded upon in this chapter. The second category is mostly characterized by secret partnerships about which not much information is available.

Much of the cooperation between Israel and the UAE that takes place in the broader international framework is related to the latter's importance on regional and international levels in general, and its importance for Israel in particular. The UAE hosts many international events and senior Israeli officials continue to visit the country within these platforms. Thus, for example, Israeli Minister of Foreign Affairs Israel Katz [visited](#) Abu Dhabi in June 2019 as part of a UN conference on environmental issues, and a delegation of senior

Israeli officials from the Ministry of Justice [attended](#) an international conference in Abu Dhabi in December. Despite the increasing Israeli presence in the UAE, and the Emiratis' gradual opening of their doors, these developments do not indicate a new formal policy toward Israel.

Senior officials in the UAE express a variety of approaches and explanations for this rapprochement, and specifically regarding the importance of the Israeli-Palestinian peace process to bilateral relations. For example, in an interview, the UAE Minister of State for Foreign Affairs Anwar Gargash defined the welcoming of Israeli delegations in the UAE as secondary and marginal gestures. Gargash stated that a breakthrough in relations will only take place in the context of progress in the Israeli-Palestinian peace process. In contrast, Abdullah bin Zayed Al Nahyan, the UAE Minister of Foreign Affairs, demonstrated a more open approach toward Israel. In December, he [shared](#) an [article](#) on Twitter about the new partnership developing between Israel and the Arab world. Some interpreted this post as a sign to Jerusalem of his readiness to develop further cooperation between the countries, without relying on the advancement of the diplomatic process with the Palestinians. Even though this was not an official statement from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, his status as a senior minister confers weight and legitimacy, and influences policy and public opinion.

The character of the alliance outlined in the article that Abdullah bin Zayed shared is not necessarily one opposed to Iran, as is commonly thought. Rather it is an expression of the moderate Arab world's stand against political Islam and radical Islamist movements, Sunni and Shia alike. These movements are perceived as a threat to the Gulf states and they are leading to the creation of new alliances, [including with Israel](#). The various approaches represent the general trend over the past decade. A rise in the number of declarations supporting relations with Israel, regardless of the Palestinian context, is apparent, as is a rise in the level of statements of this kind from senior officials in the UAE. Another recent manifestation of that approach is the engagement of the UAE's embassies throughout the world, which published during the past year [greetings on social media](#) for Jewish holidays, generating lively public internet discourse from both sides.

From the Israeli side, 2019 was characterized by more practical steps to develop relations and the creation of a positive discourse between Israel and the UAE. It is apparent that there is increased outreach by various Israeli government officials to the Gulf States in general, and to the UAE in particular. In his spoken and written declarations, Prime Minister Netanyahu has continued to express Israel's desire to become closer to the Gulf states. Through his Hebrew Twitter account, Netanyahu responded to Abdullah bin Zayed's tweet with the following words: "I celebrate the closeness between Israel and many Arab states. The time has come to achieve normalization and peace."

Israel Katz's appointment as Minister of Foreign Affairs in 2019 has led to an increase in comments of this type. In his previous role as Minister of Transportation, Katz took steps to expand relations with the Gulf States through his "Tracks for Regional Peace" initiative. As such, his appointment was an additional tailwind to Netanyahu (who served as the acting Minister of Foreign Affairs prior to Katz) in strengthening these relations. While visiting the UAE, Katz declared: "I am excited to stand here in Abu Dhabi and represent the interests of the State of Israel to the Arab Gulf States. This is a significant upgrade in the relationship between Israel and states in the region. I will continue to act together with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to advance the policy of normalization." Similarly, Katz has taken steps to advance non-aggression agreements with the Gulf states, spoke about it in public, and

has been assisted by the Americans in transferring this message to his counterparts in the Gulf. However, he has yet to receive public comments from them on this initiative.

The Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), which has been a relatively marginal player in developing relations with the UAE in previous years, has taken a more central role in 2019 in initiatives that advance relations between the states, as well as between the people. Israel's upcoming participation Expo 2020 (in Dubai) is under the MFA's [area of responsibility](#), and the MFA is in contact with [official representatives of the UAE](#) regarding the relevant preparations. Additionally, the MFA decided to operate an innovative "[virtual embassy](#)" by launching a Twitter page named "[Israel in the Gulf](#)". The page, which was introduced in pursuance of the countries' growing interests in one other, has shared [positive messages](#) intended for an audience in the UAE. Within a year, the account has gained an impressive momentum by drawing 30,000 followers. This trend was also expressed in the MFA's main Twitter account in Arabic "[Israel in Arabic](#)", which gained in 2019 an increase of 50 percent followers from the Gulf states. These two accounts achieved high engagement in comments, shares, and likes, as well as a rise in the rate of positive comments, from users in the Gulf states. Diplomatic initiatives are trickling down to society and public opinion, through social media, thereby creating an additional dimension of connections and virtual collaborations.

It appears that security ties have remained approximately the same. The joint aerial exercises, between the militaries of Israel, the UAE, the US, Italy, and Greece, [took place in 2019 as in previous years](#). Furthermore, information on partnerships between Israel and the UAE, based on deals for the purchase and procurement of military equipment, continues to [emerge](#) from time to time in the media. An [article](#) published in the New York Times about Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, the crown prince of Abu Dhabi, and in practice, the leader of the UAE, publicized that Israel has sold advanced military and technological equipment to the UAE for its F-16 fighter planes, as well as spyware for mobile devices. The identity of the Israeli company that sold the military equipment was not disclosed, but transactions of this type are signed, it appears, with the involvement of the most senior politicians on both sides. Deals with the UAE are also made by private Israeli entrepreneurs. A leading example is the Israeli businessman Mati Kochavi's [NIS 3 billion deal to export](#) surveillance aircraft to the UAE. Previously, Kochavi was mentioned as a supplier of advanced defense and border security systems to the UAE, as well as networks of security cameras in Dubai.

In the past, Israel-UAE cooperation on civilian affairs has been extremely limited. It was mostly happening around international sports events. In contrast, in 2019, the civil channel has become the most interesting and diverse one. This development, more than any other, attests to the significant rapprochement between Israel and the UAE. It runs parallel to the ongoing trend of increased engagement in international events, such as the hosting of Israeli athletes in [Judo](#) competitions in the UAE, including the display of Israeli national symbols, and the hosting of Israeli students at the [Robot Olympics](#).

In the UAE, 2019 was declared as a "Year of Tolerance." Within this framework, the country strengthened its relations with the Jewish community within it and outside of it. Although a distinction must be made between cooperation in the religious context and cooperation in the national context, one cannot completely disentangle the relationship between Judaism and Israeliness. Therefore, every interfaith encounter initiated by the UAE also advances, somewhat and indirectly, relations with Israel. Throughout 2019, there were several significant developments in this context, where the UAE [strengthened](#) the legitimacy of the

existence of a religious Jewish community in Dubai (although it has yet to officially recognize the Jewish community), and [announced](#) the creation in Abu Dhabi of the Abrahamic Center, a center for the three monotheistic religions, which will include a mosque, a church, and a synagogue under a shared compound. The UAE also issued an official [permit](#) for the position of Campus Rabbi of New York University in Abu Dhabi, and hosted multicultural events with the participation of Jewish and Druze representatives, including some Israelis. Among them was the spiritual leader of the Druze community in Israel, Mowafaq Tarif, who was [hosted](#) at the World Tolerance Summit in Dubai, with the blessing of the Emir Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum.

Expo 2020 serves as an [opportunity](#) for increased cooperation on civilian affairs. This public event is planned to include an Israeli pavilion in Dubai for almost half a year (given that the Coronavirus will not lead to the cancelation of the event). The pavilion will display Israeli technological innovations and will include performances of various Israeli artists. Such a level of public Israeli presence in an Arab-Muslim state will be unprecedented. At this stage, it appears that many Israelis will attend the Expo exhibition. However, it remains unclear what their visa status will be, and whether entrance will be permitted for all bearers of an Israeli identity card. If this is the case, it will set an additional precedent in relations between Israel and the UAE. Israeli tourism interest is expected to further develop due to a rising awareness of the UAE as an attractive tourist destination following the Expo. This is also expected to contribute to the strengthening of civil relations between the two states. Indeed, on the Israeli side, it appears that coverage of the UAE in the Israeli media has already significantly increased, as well as the interest in visiting the UAE. Two in-depth magazine articles, introducing the UAE to the Israeli audience, were published last year in the leading daily newspaper *Yedioth Ahronoth*, after a senior reporter traveled there: one on the [Jewish community](#), and a second on [Dubai as a tourist destination](#). These articles had significant exposure and further expanded Israeli interest in the UAE.

Whilst we became more accustomed to hearing about Israeli tourism to the Gulf in 2019, tourism in the opposite direction has also developed somewhat in the last year. There was an increase in the number of inquiries from residents of the Gulf about visiting Israel. Journalists, social media figures, and others visited Israel from the Gulf, as part of several official delegations organized by the Israeli MFA. Social media emerged as an additional platform where connections are made and messages are passed between the people. On Twitter, there has been increasingly positive interactions between the sides, despite the voices of Arab criticism towards Israel that continue to be dominant. Social media figures from the UAE write openly about their hope for stronger relations with Israel. The blogger Hassan Sajwani, for example, sometimes posts [messages in Hebrew](#), and has received supportive comments from Israelis. This development characterizes Israel's relations with other Gulf States as well. Similarly to developments in interfaith cooperation, the virtual interaction on social media also highlights the complex entanglement of religious and national issues within the discourse between Israel and the UAE.

C. Summary

The developments in 2019 demonstrate that senior officials in the UAE are increasingly interested in taking significant steps forward in their country's relations with Israel. This is part of a broader trend of closer relations between Israel and major Arab states. The UAE will probably not be the Arab state that will lead a public breakthrough in relations with Israel; it wishes to join an ongoing process, after other states will pave the way forward. The Israeli-

Palestinian conflict, and the UAE's attitude towards it, are decisive in shaping Israel-UAE relations. There are different approaches on the issue among senior officials in the UAE, and a unified Emirati policy on the subject remains absent at present. In practice, we can identify increased rapprochement between Israel and the UAE, together with a positive attitude between the two states. However, the path to normalizing ties is still long, far, and contingent on similar decisions being made in the neighboring Gulf states as well as on changes in the shifting Israeli political landscape.

The new channels of cooperation that are being formed between Israel and the UAE on social and cultural levels demonstrate the emergence of a deeper dimension of relations. In contrast to the ad-hoc opportunities that characterized relations until 2018, the increased cooperation on civilian affairs in 2019 attests to an element of long-term cooperation and mutual public interest, beyond relations between the leadership of both countries. One of the interesting phenomena in this context is the connection between the diplomatic dimension and the civil dimension, where "the virtual embassy" of the Israeli MFA has received positive reception on the Emirati side just as the holiday greetings of the Emirati embassies throughout the world have received enthusiastic responses from Israelis. The positive discourse apparent in social media, the tolerant approach of the UAE towards Judaism, the great interest that the UAE demonstrates in interfaith relations, Israel's anticipated participation in Expo 2020, and the resultant Israeli public and tourist interest – all advance relations between the countries. In this respect, 2019 was a year of many significant and positive developments in cooperation between Israel and the UAE.