

# The Abraham Accord: The Israeli - Emirati Love Affair's Impact on Jordan

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The Abraham Accord is not a prelude to a peace settlement but a prelude to further Israeli expansion.



If fully-implemented, the deal will reshape the regional geopolitical landscape.



The deal's implicit message is that the oft-celebrated Arab solidarity on the Palestinian cause no longer exists.







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# 1

## Introduction

No single issue in the Middle East has consumed Jordanians more than the thorny Israel - Palestinian peace process. Jordanians believe that the conflict's persistence is detrimental to Jordan's long - term stability. Interestingly, many Israelis have toyed with the idea of turning Jordan into an alternative Palestinian homeland, which would allow Israel to enjoy complete control of the West Bank. Phrases such as the «Jordanian option» and «alternative homeland» are often rehashed by the Israeli right as a final resolution of the «Palestinian Question.» Historically, Jordan has relied on «Arab solidarity» to counter these threatening proposals. For this reason, Jordan is concerned about the rapprochement between Israel and some Gulf countries.

It is hard to overlook Jordanian officials' displeasure with the Abraham Accord between the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Israel. Explicit in Jordanian official statements' released hours after the deal's announcement is a firm conviction that there is no practical or acceptable alternative to the two - state solution. Unfortunately for Jordan, the new deal has the potential of weakening the

decades - old Arab consensus reflected in the 2002 Arab Peace Initiative (API). Jordanian Foreign Minister Ayman al - Safadi made it explicitly clear that short of establishing a viable Palestinian state, conflict, not peace, would prevail in the region. In his words, «If Israel sees the agreement as an incentive for the end of the occupation and the return of the Palestinian people's right to freedom and to establish their independent state on the 1967 borders with Eastern Jerusalem as its capital, the region will move towards a just peace. However, if Israel does not do this, the conflict will deepen and threaten the whole region.»<sup>1</sup> That being said, Jordanian officials refrained from condemning the Abraham Accord. Instead, they reiterated Jordan's support for the traditional Arab position on the resolution of the Arab - Israeli conflict and Palestinian statehood. Perhaps Jordan sought to avoid a head - on confrontation with the UAE whose financial support Jordan direly needs.

Clearly the deal, if fully - implemented, has the potential to reshape the regional geopolitical

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<sup>1</sup> For more details see, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/middle-east/jordan-israel-must-choose-between-just-peace-conflict/1941378>

landscape, thus creating new challenges for Jordan to contend with. Worse, if other Arab states follow the UAE's step, Jordan will be strategically exposed. Jordan's long-held argument that Israel can only enjoy normalization with Arab countries if it agrees to a two-state solution has run out of steam. On the contrary, the agreement has only given weight to Netanyahu's argument that normalization with Arab countries is possible without solving the Israeli - Palestinian conflict. In other words, the Israeli claim that the Palestinian question is no longer a priority to all Arab countries has gained ground. Some even argue that anti-Zionism has «ceased to

be a major defining feature of Arab politics. Instead, shared hostility towards Iran and its allies has been forging a new rapprochement between Israel and a number of Arab states.»<sup>2</sup>

This paper addresses three core points. The first examines how this deal came to fruition in light of the UAE's changing threat perception; the second section explores the implications of this deal on Jordan's national interests; the final section addresses the options available to Jordan and how Jordan may respond to this new development given the apparent collapse of Arab solidarity with Palestinians.

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<sup>2</sup> For more details on this point, see, <https://is.gd/GzhnvB>

## 2

# The Deal and the UAE's Threat Perception

Unlike its previous conservative foreign policy based on self - preservation, the UAE has emerged as an influential player in the region.

The UAE under the leadership of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed (MBZ), is well - known for an aggressively interventionist foreign policy. It has backed Saudi Arabia in an inconclusive war in Yemen that has created one of the world's worst humanitarian catastrophes, opposed and suppressed Muslim Brotherhood movements across the Arab world, supported counter - revolutions to push back the democratic movements of the Arab Spring, and intervened in Libya's civil war. Abu Dhabi's antagonism toward political Islam is well - documented. Emirati officials have long considered transnational, political Islamist ideologies an existential threat to the country's core values. The Shiite sectarian regime in Iran and the Sunni Muslim Brotherhood are seen as constant threats to the stability of the de - facto powers in the region. For the UAE, these transnational movements act as a key driver for regional radicalism. The UAE accused Qatar of backing the Muslim Brotherhood during the 2011 - 2014 Arab Spring and having close ties with Iran. Thus, Abu Dhabi was a key driver

for the three - year boycott imposed on Qatar in 2017.

Over the last decade, ties between UAE and Israel have consolidated. Indeed, the two countries have been inching closer to full cooperation due to three factors: animosity with Iran, a loathing of the Muslim Brotherhood, and a shared conviction that peace with the Palestinians is a remote possibility. Apparently, the UAE has come to believe that a two - state solution, the precondition to an Arab effort to realizing a comprehensive peace and normalization, had been obscured by a new pressing reality. Palestine is no longer on Abu Dhabi's radar; if anything, Palestine has lost its relevance among Emirati rulers and decision - makers. Instead, the UAE has been silently promoting a new narrative pushing back against the centrality of the Palestinian cause. The Arabic twitter hashtag «Palestine is not my case» suddenly went viral in the UAE and Saud Arabia, both known to employ an army of twitter - bots to promote their regional agendas, only a few months before the Abraham Accord was announced.



While clandestine ties between the UAE and Israel have been well - known and recorded by observers, it is still surprising, nevertheless, that they have gone so far as to elevate the «below the horizon» ties into a full - fledged peace treaty. Abu Dhabi cites the deal as an effort made for the benefit of the Palestinians. According to Minister of State for Foreign Affairs, Anwar Gargash argued that the agreement dealt a «death blow» to the annexation of Palestinian lands.<sup>3</sup> Ironically, few, if any, Palestinians buy into this argument echoed by Emirati media outlets. Indeed, this idea is only a fig leaf for the UAE's true interests. In the words of Hanan Ashrawi, a longtime Palestinian advisor, «Public opinion, and the Arab world as a whole - and among

people of conscience - know that this is a sellout.”<sup>4</sup> The Palestinian Authority (PA) went as far as dubbing the peace deal as a «betrayal.» As the renowned historian, Avi Shlaim succinctly put it, «It is one thing for the rulers of the UAE to pursue their narrow national interest by bringing their decades - long covert cooperation with Israel into the open. That can be justified as traditional realpolitik: Iran is their enemy and they need Israel's help to confront it. But to pretend that the UAE struck the peace deal with Israel in order to help the Palestinians achieve their goals is rank hypocrisy.»<sup>5</sup> Therefore, no matter how Abu Dhabi's rulers spin the deal as a contribution to peace, Palestinians strongly believe it undermines their rights.

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<sup>3</sup> The National, August 12, 2020, <https://is.gd/85KptG>

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<sup>4</sup> The Washington Post, «UAE official defends historic pact with Israel; Palestinian adviser calls it a 'sellout' August 22, 2020. <https://rb.gy/s8acz0>

<sup>5</sup> Avi Shlaim, «UAE - Israel deal: Breakthrough or betrayal?» Middle East Eye, August 24, 2020. <https://www.middleeasteye.net/opinion/uae-israel-deal-breakthrough-or-betrayal>

### 3

## New Geopolitical Reality: A Paradigm Shift?

Over the last decade, alliances in the Middle East have become very fluid. Regional aspirations, domestic pressures, and President Trump's wavering foreign policy have had a detrimental effect on the region's military - political arrangements. For some Sunni Arab states, Israel can play a role in forging a new anti - Iran alliance. The idea was fully promoted by then - Deputy Crown Prince and Minister of Defense of Saudi Arabia Mohammed Bin Salman, now imminent heir to the throne, who views the region through a unique prism of an all - consuming rivalry with Iran. To be sure, alliances have long been burgeoning between Israel and some Gulf countries. Interestingly, key Gulf leaders talk privately about the need to construct a bloc that includes Israel to contain threats posed by Iran. As the WikiLeaks cables revealed, King Hamad of Bahrain talked about the necessity of having real peace with Israel to confront Iran.<sup>6</sup>

Seen in this way, the so - called Abraham deal ushers in a new geopolitical reality in the region. Jordanians suspect that other Arab countries may jump on the normalization bandwagon, thus weakening Jordan's stance

vis - à - vis Israel. There is rampant speculation that Bahrain, Sudan, Morocco, and Oman will follow suit by normalizing and establishing official ties with Tel Aviv. It remains to be seen if Saudi Arabia - who is keen to cultivate a tacit alliance with Israel - will sign a similar deal. Perhaps Riyadh will be reluctant to go down the same road as a great deal of its legitimacy is derived from being the «protector» of the Muslims all over the world. Nonetheless, the Saudi leadership has not yet objected or criticized the UAE - Israel deal; indeed, it has been notably silent.

The Abraham deal poses several strategic challenges and headaches for Jordan. First, the deal does not prevent Israel from going ahead with annexing the Jordan Valley - a key political and ideological goal of Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu. Over the last few months, Jordanian diplomacy has painstakingly built the case to the international community and Western allies that annexation would kill the two - state solution and would be unacceptable to Jordan. The text of the US - sponsored Abraham Accord reveals that Israel is committed only to suspending the annexation for some time. Indeed, Israel was not going to implement annexation even without the deal

<sup>6</sup> For more details see, [https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/06MANAMA1849\\_a.html](https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/06MANAMA1849_a.html)

for pure domestic considerations and divisions within the White House's peace team. Hence, the UAE's claim that the deal preserves the two-state solution is nothing but a smokescreen concealing a different, grim reality. A close look at the deal reveals that the UAE does not secure Israeli commitment not to annex parts of the West Bank. Both American and Israeli sides were quick to clarify this point.

A second serious concern is that the deal's implicit message to Jordan is that the oft-celebrated Arab solidarity over the Palestinian cause no longer exists and Arab unity with Jordan's official approach to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has come to an end. There is an implicit feeling in Amman that Jordanians have been let down and abandoned by the agreement. Observers may disagree with this point as Jordan refrained from condemning the normalization agreement like Palestinian leadership did. However, one needs to understand the delicate Jordanian-Emirati relationship that has been cultivated over the years. While Jordan did not oppose the UAE-Israel deal, critically, it did not endorse it either. In a trilateral meeting that included Jordan's King Abdullah II, President Abdulfattah El-Sisi of Egypt, and Iraqi Prime Minister Mustafa Al Kadhimi, the King made it perfectly clear that short of two state solution there will be no peace in the region. In fact, the Abraham deal has shown that the API, built on the concept that Arab states collectively agreed to normalize ties with Israel only once an independent Palestinian state is formed on 1967 borders, is off the table. The UAE is willing to forge an alliance with Israel regardless of the resolution of the Palestinians issue; Arab states' collective

vital bargaining chip with Israel has been lost. Another reason why the Abraham deal is of great concern to Jordan is the marginalization of the Jordanian role in the holy sites in East Jerusalem. The Hashemite monarchy has custodianship over Islamic and Christian sites in Jerusalem, a role it has played for most of the 20th century that was enshrined in the 1994 Jordan-Israel peace treaty. The new Abraham deal suggest that Abu Dhabi will be the avenue for transferring Muslim pilgrims to Jerusalem. Rather than using Jordan as a conduit, utilizing the kingdom's geographic position as Israel's neighbor and decades-old presence in Jerusalem, the new deal establishes a strong link between Abu Dhabi and Ben-Gurion airport. Neither the UAE nor Israel took Jordan's interests into their account. It is not clear yet to what extent Jordan will be marginalized if other Arab countries sign peace deals with Israel. Over the last three years, speculations about the future of the Hashemite custodianship over Christian and Muslim holy sites in Jerusalem have been rife.

Lastly, with the UAE-Israel normalization agreement, Jordan loses its role as a «mediator» country between Israel and the Gulf countries. For some time, Jordan sought to be the back channel for Israeli-Gulf arrangements. Not only did Israel overpass Jordan to reach out to the Gulf, the UAE is expected to play a more effective role than Jordan in facilitating Israel's ties with other Gulf countries, with whom Abu Dhabi has vast economic and geopolitical leverage. It goes without saying that Jordan's relative centrality and relevance has been vastly diminished by this deal.

## 4

### Difficult Days Lie Ahead

To be sure, Jordan and Israel are likely to hit more bumps in the years ahead. Many in both Jordan and Israel have begun to question the core premises of the 25 - year - old peace treaty, whose anniversary was passed in 2019 with no fanfare. The ascendancy of a radical or maximalist right in Israel - who is ideologically committed to the idea of a 'Greater Israel' - has forced Netanyahu to rethink the two - state paradigm as a solution to the long - standing conflict with the Palestinians. Simultaneously, new developments in the region have helped Israel reconsider its regional priorities.

Jordan has been concerned by the rapprochement between Israel and some Gulf countries - Saudi Arabia and the UAE in particular. Jordan appears to have lost its geopolitical centrality and relevance, a position Jordanians have employed for decades to gain strategic rent from its allies. Jordanian feel that the rug has been pulled out from under them. Already, the Gulf countries no longer needed Jordan as they did in the past. They managed to develop independent security arrangements and even better educational systems, which were once established and powered by skilled

Jordanian human resources. Worse still is the prospect that should Jordan stand up and speak out against the Abraham Accord, the jobs of hundreds of thousands of Jordanians working the Gulf and the billions of dollars they send home each year as remittances, would be jeopardized.

The fall of Saddam Hussein's regime in Iraq in 2003 has ameliorated Israel's sense of security. The absence of a threat from what was once dubbed "the Eastern Front" has further demoted the importance of Jordan as a buffer zone. Likewise, the covert relations between Israel and some Gulf countries have diminished the intermediary role Jordan once played. Against this backdrop, Israel began to reorient its regional priorities. To the Jordanians' dismay, the Trump administration and Israel found in Saudi Arabia and UAE heavyweight players who could assume a crucial role in pressuring the Palestinians to compromise. This new paradigm is based on the assumption that the Palestinian question has been placed on the back burner. In other words, the Palestine cause is no longer central to many Arab countries.

As a corollary, Jordan is sidelined by this new paradigm and by the Abraham Accord. No one can ignore the fact that Israeli - Jordanian relations have reached a low - point. Observers are not oblivious to the fact that the absence of trust between Jordan and Israel and the growing sense of diverging interests has never been more acute over the last three decades. Casting aside whether this deal will generate other Israeli - Arab peace agreements, it is important to assess the future relationship between Israel and Jordan in light of the new agreement. I argue that despite the 25 year - old peace agreement, conflict between Israel and Jordan is simmering. Jordan is locked in a clear struggle with Israel over the latter's insistence on doing what it takes to make a two - state solution impossible.

Integral to the understanding of the resilience of the conflict is that the minimum demands of Jordan for solving the conflict and that of the Israelis are incompatible. Israel's expansion and assertive settlement policy chip away at the Palestinians' ability to establish their own state. This is bad news for Jordan. Israel's identity - defined as a Jewish democratic state - makes Israel loathe the idea of a bi - national state. For this reason, they seek to rid themselves of Palestinians, who they see as a demographic threat. In his book "The Two - State Delusion," Pdraig O'Malley addresses what he calls "Demographic: The Enemy Within." Put simply, O'Malley<sup>7</sup> asserts

that Palestinians "either will outnumber Jews within a few years or already have." In the Herzliya conference held in 2000, Israeli elites warned against the demographic threat and the need to preserve the Jewishness of the state. Arnon Soffer argues that the only way to secure a Jewish and democratic Israel is by effecting the separation between Jews and the Palestinians.<sup>8</sup> And yet, this is easier said than done. Given the gravity of the evolving demographic reality, Israeli Jews have only three choices. The first choice is to agree to the principle of a two - state solution, which allows Israel to keep a roughly 75% Jewish majority in Israel proper. The second is a bi - national state in which a minority of Jews rule over the majority of the Palestinians. If Israel refuses to extend the voting franchise to the Palestinian, Israel will become an apartheid state. Finally, Israel may remain a democratic state, thus allowing the majority Palestinians to rule. To avert the last two choices, the only way Forward for Israel is by allowing for a two - state solution. On the whole, Israelis understand this logic.

On various occasions, King Abdullah warned against the failure of the two - state solution. Implicit in his warning is that Jews may lose the authority if a bi - national state is to follow. The King is hardly alone in this thinking. The Palestinians also believe that the lack of a two - state solution will lead to a one - state reality.

<sup>7</sup> O'Malley, Pdraig (2015) *The Two - State Delusion: Israel and Palestine - A Tale of Two Narratives*, Penguin Books (Viking). P. 264

<sup>8</sup> For more details on this point, see, Arnon Sofer (2001) *Israel: Demography, 2000 - 2020: Dangers and Opportunities*, University of Haifa, National Security Studies Center).

Recently, the Jordanian Prime Minister Omar Razzaz talked about the readiness of Jordan to consider a one - state solution. The Palestinian chief negotiator, Saeb Erekat, argued that the Palestinians would rethink their approach. Erekat makes that case that Palestinians should transform the struggle into a push for one state with equal rights for everyone living in historic Palestine.<sup>9</sup>

For Jordan, the consequences of the failure of a two - state paradigm are grave. The crux of the dilemma lies in national identity.

For obvious reasons, Jordanians suspect that the deal of the century's implementation would eventually transform Jordan into an alternative homeland for the Palestinians. The combination of mass resettlement and a confederation of whatever parts of the West Bank that Israel may relinquish means that Jordan as we now know it would cease to exist. With such a development seen as a threat to Jordan's identity and stability, it remains to be seen how the changing dynamics of Jordan - Israeli relationship will play out in the future.

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9 Bernard Avishai, «The fight to define the very essence of Israel,» The Guardian, May 20, 2018.

## 5

## Conclusion

The Abraham Accord is not a prelude to a peace settlement but a prelude to further Israeli expansion at the expense of both the Palestinians and Jordanians. The sheer asymmetry of power between Israel and Jordan leaves little room for doubt as to who will impose the final arrangement. Jordanians are aware that this dynamic was simmering long before the UAE's normalization hat-trick. The Emirati move sets in motion a process whereby other Arab countries could normalize with Israel without paying attention to the Palestinians' rights or statehood. Jordanians conclude that some Arab countries - much like Israel - are unwilling to help reach a comprehensive resolution to the conflict.

Anti-Zionism has ceased to be a major defining feature of Arab politics. Instead, shared hostility towards Iran and its allies has been forging a new rapprochement between Israel and a number of Arab states. For this reason, Jordan is walking a tightrope. Not only is Jordan financially hard-pressed, but the United States has undergone a radical change in politics and foreign policy under the Trump Administration. Jordan is yet to come up with

a plan to defend its interests in case pressures mount from either the Gulf or Washington. As the clock is ticking on the two-state solution, the threat posed by the revival of other detrimental options is all too real.

Jordan's approach to peace - which once enjoyed a nominal Arab consensus - is now irrelevant. The peace first, normalization later concept has been dealt a death-blow by the Abraham Accord. It seems that Netanyahu's approach is now more relevant. The outside-in approach: normalization with the Gulf countries with the purpose of isolating and weakening the Palestinians to force them to settle the conflict on Israel's terms. For the time being, it seems that Jordan does not have what it takes to affect the process. Though worried by the new regional developments, official statements were measured not to upset the Gulf countries. Israel as well as Gulf countries understand the limits of what the Jordanian government could do.

Having established that Jordan's options are relatively limited, Amman does have multiple options available should it think outside the

box. First, Amman can discourage other Arab countries from taking the same step as the UAE. Reaching out to key countries such as Saudi Arabia and Morocco should be the focus of Jordanian diplomacy in months to come. Without antagonizing the UAE, Jordan can still work discretely to expose and isolate the Emiratis' normalization and its toll on Arab public opinion. Such steps could include an emergency Arab League summit to confirm the API, effectively upstaging the UAE and prospect for further normalization.

Second, though reconciliation between Hamas and the Palestinian Authority is a distant prospect, Jordan can and should throw its weight behind efforts to unite Palestinian factions. While the realities of Palestinian political, demographic and geographic fragmentation are an impediment, it is not too late to unite Palestinians around one strategic goal. The argument that Jordan has lost its impact on Palestinian politics must not deter Jordanian officials from working with the Palestinians towards a unified diplomatic front, which will be needed to push back pressure from the UAE and other Gulf states that may be tempted to strengthen their alliance with Israel.

A third tool available to Amman is its strong ties with its allies in the West, namely the US and the EU. If Jordan continues to invest time, effort and political capital in convincing the international community that a Palestinian state is a prerequisite for peace, it can frame the UAE - Israel "peace for peace" approach as a gambit whose pursuit without solving the Palestinian question could lead to radicalization in the region. As Jordan is still widely seen as a lynchpin for stability in the region, its voice on the impact of the ongoing absence of peace resonates. Finally, a fourth point of leverage Jordan has is its own public's opposition to the Abraham Accord. Should Jordan lift the muzzle it has placed on journalists and media outlets and allow them to reflect the widespread anger and unanimous Jordanian rejection of the UAE - Israel deal, it can give a voice to the Arab street's opposition to normalization. While popular sentiment is an insignificant factor in the decision - making process in some autocratic Gulf countries, leaders are not immune and listen to the rumblings on the street.





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### **About the author**

Dr. Barari is currently a professor of International Relations and Middle East politics at the University of Jordan. Prior to that, he was a professor of Middle East politics at the University of Nebraska at Omaha and at Yale University. He also served as a Senior Fellow at the United States Institute of Peace (USIP) based in Washington, D.C. He was a senior researcher at the Center for Strategic Studies at the University of Jordan. He received his Ph.D. from Durham University in England, his MA from Leeds University in England and his BA from the University of Jordan. He is also a frequent commentator for key Arab and international TV stations. Prof. Barari's core area of research is the Arab-Israeli conflict and the Middle East peace process, Israel-Jordan relations, and regional security and Middle Eastern politics.





It is hard to overlook Jordanian officials' displeasure with the Abraham Accord. Explicit in Jordanian official statements released after the deal's announcement is a firm conviction that there is no practical or acceptable alternative to the two-state solution. Unfortunately for Jordan, the new deal has the potential of weakening the decades-old Arab consensus reflected in the 2002 Arab Peace Initiative (API).



That being said, Jordanian officials refrained from explicitly condemning the Abraham Accord. Perhaps Jordan sought to avoid a head-on confrontation with the UAE whose financial support Jordan direly needs. Nevertheless, Amman does have multiple options available should it think outside the box. First, Amman can discourage other Arab countries from taking the same step as the UAE. Such steps could include an emergency Arab League summit to confirm the API, effectively upstaging the UAE and prospect for further normalization.



Besides, Jordan can and should throw its weight behind efforts to unite Palestinian factions. A third tool available to Amman is its strong ties with its allies in the West, namely the US and the EU. If Jordan continues to invest time, effort and political capital in convincing the international community that a Palestinian state is a prerequisite for peace, it can frame the UAE-Israel "peace for peace" approach as a gambit whose pursuit without solving the Palestinian question could lead to radicalization in the region.

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