

Bahrain, Israel's new peace partner: A tiny country in the shadow of Iran

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The Gulf nation, which has become the 4th Arab country to agree to a peace deal with Israel, has long blamed Tehran for fomenting unrest among its Shiite population

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Bahrain on Friday became the the fourth Arab country, after Egypt, Jordan and the UAE, to agree to full diplomatic ties with Israel.

Like the UAE, Bahrain has never fought a war against Israel and doesn't share a border with it. But Bahrain, like most of the Arab world, had long rejected diplomatic ties with Israel in the absence of a peace deal establishing a Palestinian state on lands captured by Israel in 1967.

Like the UAE agreement, Friday's Bahrain-Israel deal will normalize diplomatic, commercial, security and other relations between the two countries.

Bahrain, along with Saudi Arabia, had already dropped a prohibition on Israeli flights using its airspace. Saudi acquiescence to the agreements has been considered key to the deals.

Other Arab nations believed to be on the cusp of fully recognizing Israel include Oman and Sudan. While tacitly blessing the deals Saudi Arabia, the regional power player, is not expected to move as quickly.

Bahrain signaled its intentions last year hosting the launch of the economic part of the Trump Peace Plan.

While the UAE's population remains small and the federation has no tradition of standing up to the country's autocracy, Bahrain represents a far-different country.

Just off the coast of Saudi Arabia, the island of Bahrain is among the world's smallest countries, only about 760 square kilometers (290 square miles). Bahrain's location in the Persian Gulf long has made it a trading stop and a naval defensive position. The island is home to the US Navy's 5th Fleet and a recently built British naval base.

Bahrain is acutely aware of threats posed by Iran, an anxiety that comes from Bahrain's majority Shiite population, despite being ruled since 1783 by the Sunni Al Khalifa family. Iran under Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi had pushed to take over the island after the British left, though Bahrainis in 1970 overwhelmingly supported becoming an independent nation and the UN Security Council unanimously backed that.

Since Iran's 1979 Islamic Revolution, Bahrain's rulers have blamed Iran for arming militants on the island. Iran denies the accusations, though weapons experts suggest explosives found there bear similarities to others linked to Iran. Israel and Iran view each other as top regional enemies.

Outside of those tensions, Bahrain's Shiite majority has accused the government of treating them like second-class citizens. The Shiites joined pro-democracy activists in demanding more political freedoms in 2011, as Arab Spring protests swept across the wider Middle East. Saudi and Emirati troops ultimately helped violently put down the demonstrations.

In recent years, Bahrain has cracked down on all dissent, imprisoned activists and hampered independent reporting on the island. While the Obama administration halted the sale of F-16 fighter jets to Bahrain over human rights concerns, the Trump administration dropped that after coming into office.

Bahrain's royal family and officials have come out in support of the Israel-UAE agreement. However, civil society groups and others have condemned the move and warned the monarchy not to follow in UAE's footsteps — despite Bahrain's yearslong flirtation with Israel and Jewish leaders. Unlike the Emirates, Jews had a historical presence on the island and some still live there.

A member of the Bahraini royal family visits the country's small Hanukah celebration every year, and the regime makes a point of treating the tiny Jewish community well.

In 2017, two prominent US rabbis said Bahrain's king told them he hoped the Arab boycott of Israel would end. An interfaith group from Bahrain that year also visited Israel, though the state-run Bahrain News Agency later said that it didn't "represent any official entity" after an uproar erupted on social media.

Bahrain has increasingly relied on support from other nations as it struggles with its debts, particularly neighboring Saudi Arabia. In that way, Bahrain has followed in lockstep with Riyadh, meaning any normalization with Israel likely got the kingdom's approval, though, Saudi Arabia has for its part remained silent since the Emirati announcement.

TOI Staff contributed to this report