

The UAE-Bahrain-Israel accords are a big step — in the wrong direction

Opinion by **Ezzedine C. Fishere**

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American commentators are right to welcome peace agreements between the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain and Israel. It is not every day that we see signs of reconciliation between Arabs and Israelis — [people-to-people exchanges](#), direct flights between Tel Aviv and Arab capitals, partnerships between businesses and prospects of governmental cooperation starting with covid-19. All of these are much-needed changes in a region where expressions of extreme hatred and exclusion are the sad norm.

However, like all good news in the Middle East, these signs are likely to be short-lived — and to leave us with a bitter aftertaste. Beneath the veneer of “peace,” these agreements strengthen four nefarious dynamics that far outweigh the current niceties between Arab governments and Israel.

First, the “Abraham Accords” don’t end a single conflict in the Middle East. The UAE and Bahrain did not have diplomatic relations with Israel; nor were they in engaged in conflict with it. In [fact, they cooperated with Israel silently for years](#). The actual conflicts in the region are taking place in Yemen, Syria, Libya and Lebanon, where the UAE and Saudi Arabia are [supporting factions fighting those supported by Qatar, Turkey or Iran](#).

The “peace” accords do not bring us closer to ending these conflicts. If anything, they are likely to deepen them further as the alliance between Israel, UAE and Saudi Arabia against Iran, so far kept under the table, becomes more assertive. In other words, these agreements open the door for Israel to become a fuller partner in the Arab Gulf fight against Iran and sometimes Turkey.

Second, the normalization of relations between UAE, Bahrain and Israel without a peace agreement between Israel and the Palestinian Authority erodes further the prospect of a two-state-solution. A broad Arab recognition of Israel, and the prospect of cooperation and business partnerships, was one of the few remaining incentives for Israel to make territorial concessions to the weakened Palestinians. This was the idea behind the [Arab Peace Initiative of 2002](#), promising Israel full normalization and acceptance in the region in return for a full withdrawal from territories occupied in 1967.

Sadly, Arab Gulf states have abstained from demonstrating their seriousness about normalization when that could have tilted the balance inside Israel in favor of territorial concessions. Now this window has closed. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and his supporters can claim, convincingly, that Israel doesn’t need to make territorial concessions in order to win the recognition of Arab states. The obvious result is more Israeli support for (or toleration of) the status quo, which is nothing but a continued slide down the problematic road of apartheid.

Third, Palestinians’ deep sense of betrayal will radicalize them further. The more liberal-minded will increasingly replace the dream of statehood with a civil rights movement working toward equal rights for all those living under Israel’s control, which is likely to [deepen](#) the Israeli-Palestinian conflict even further. The less liberal-minded among Palestinians will be confirmed in their belief that “armed resistance” is the only way forward. Supporters of groups such as Hamas, Islamic Jihad and Hezbollah are already [pointing out](#) the stark difference between the position of the Palestinian Authority today and that of the Taliban, whose “deputy mullah” posed with Secretary of State Mike Pompeo to [inaugurate](#) negotiations over the future of Afghanistan.

Finally, normalizing relations with Israel will widen the gap further between Arab rulers and their populations. Arab public opinion has always been hostile to Israel, and Arab regimes have often fed this hostility to distract from their own failures. When these regimes later felt the need to recognize Israel, they were constrained by the hostility they had fomented among their populations. A Palestinian endorsement, understood to come with a peace agreement establishing a Palestinian state, would provide them with the necessary fig leaf. Absent that, normalizing relations with Israel is perceived as a naked betrayal — not just of Palestinians, but also of Arab aspirations and dignity. This will add to existing grievances over inequality, corruption, and ethnic and sectarian discrimination, aggravating the risks for regimes’ stability.

Unless the UAE and Bahrain miraculously turn their normalization with Israel into a broader process that revives the Arab Peace Initiative and bring Palestinians and Israelis closer to a two-state solution, these agreements will end up undermining the security of all the players in the Middle East.

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