

Speech

The Kingdom of Bahrain's Foreign Policy, the Abraham Accords, and Prospects for the Future

Hull University

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Distinguished Guests,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is my great pleasure to join you today, on behalf of His Excellency Shaikh Fawaz Bin Mohamed Al Khalifa, Ambassador of the Kingdom of Bahrain. May I start by conveying the Ambassadors warmest greetings to you all, and in particular His Excellency's thanks, and mine, to everyone at the MESG team and Hull University for the generous invitation to address you.

I genuinely appreciate this opportunity to give some insight into Bahrain's foreign policy – its history, objectives and principles. In particular, I want to address the momentous developments of the last few months, and how these might impact both Bahrain and the wider Middle East.

Bahrain joined the United Nations in September 1971, but Bahraini diplomacy can in fact be traced back slightly further – to the establishment of the foreign affairs directorate, later to become the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, in January 1969. Even in those uncertain times for the Middle East – in fact, particularly

in those uncertain times, Bahrain's foreign policy was from the outset based on very clear objectives, principles and values.

It is a cliché to say that the security, prosperity and development of the country and its people is the central objective of foreign policy. But that does not make it any less true, and given the many crises and issues that have beset the Middle East for so many decades, it is a particularly challenging objective to achieve for Bahrain – and indeed for others in the region. Nevertheless, our overriding priority has been a secure and prosperous country, within a secure and prosperous region.

From the earliest days, Bahrain has sought to achieve this objective through a consistent set of principles and values.

First and foremost,

- this means an approach of cooperation, rather than confrontation.
- It means always seeking to resolve issues through dialogue, mutual respect and moderation. And
- it means upholding international law, acting as a “good neighbour” and a constructive regional actor, while not interfering in the affairs of other states.

These values are why Bahrain has been such a strong and consistent partner of our friends and allies such as the United Kingdom. From the liberation of Kuwait in 1991 to our ongoing partnership on issues such as counter-extremism and freedom of navigation, Bahrain has been a solid, reliable ally

because we share the same outlook and the same values, and recognise the critical importance of cooperation to achieve our goals.

But, the Kingdom's outward-looking, open and cooperative approach is not simply based on calculations of self-interest. Rather, it is a natural, organic development of Bahrain's own unique culture and heritage. Over the course of many centuries, Bahrain has been a centre for regional commerce, bringing together traders from across the Middle East and beyond. As a result, the country and its people have a deep-rooted and well-established culture of openness to others that goes beyond mere tolerance, and embraces genuine respect for the faiths, values, ideas and outlooks of others.

So we have always had a rich and diverse society in Bahrain, with communities of different faiths and cultures living and working harmoniously together. Our thriving Jewish community, for example, has called Bahrain its home for over a century, and continues to play an important and active role at all levels in our national life. Our capital, Manama, is the most religiously diverse city in the GCC, housing Sunni, Shiite, Christian, Jewish, and Hindu places of worship all within a one-mile radius. Indeed, we have a Hindu temple which recently celebrated its 200th anniversary, while the country will soon complete works on the largest Catholic cathedral in the region to serve a community of over a 140,000 Catholics in Bahrain and potentially more in our part of the world.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I wanted to highlight this culture not to present a pretty picture, but to demonstrate how deep-rooted are the values which underpin our foreign policy. Because openness, dialogue and cooperation are not strangers to the Bahraini people - rather they are innate, core values of our national character, accumulated from many centuries of experience.

In recent years, His Majesty King Hamad has built further on these foundations, and has reached out to foster dialogue and mutual respect between faiths and peoples in the region and further afield. The King Hamad Global Centre for Peaceful Coexistence has worked at a practical level to increase knowledge and understanding, for example through last year's signing of a Memorandum of Understanding with the US Department of State's Office of the Special Envoy to Monitor and Combat Anti-Semitism.

Meanwhile, the ground-breaking 2017 Bahrain Declaration sets out the principles of religious tolerance and coexistence, and was unveiled in partnership with the Simon Wiesenthal Center.

So I have no doubt that these same values will continue to form the bedrock of the Kingdom of Bahrain's approach to regional and international issues, and be a central component of achieving the country's priorities.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

These, then, are the aims of the Kingdom of Bahrain's foreign policy, along with the principles and values which inform our diplomacy. I hope they

provide some context for Bahrain's signing of the Abraham Accords in September last year, and show how this historic step was fully consistent with Bahrain's longstanding approach to foreign policy.

Because be in no doubt that the Abraham Accords are **a** truly momentous development for the Middle East, and one which can fundamentally change the dynamics of the region. Already we have seen Morocco and Sudan join Bahrain and the United Arab Emirate in establishing diplomatic relations with Israel, and no one will be surprised if more states follow.

So what are the implications of the Accords for the Middle East?

The primary "big picture" effect is how, just from the signing the accords, we have seen a step change in regional dynamics. It has long been clear that the "old approach" of confrontation and conflict has been a failure – bringing nothing but mistrust and missed opportunities. With a few strokes of a pen, that whole narrative has been up-ended.

Now, suddenly, it has become possible to see a new way forward for the region. One in which its nations work together to overcome challenges, solve issues, and build a better, more secure and more prosperous future for all its people. And as the benefits of cooperation over confrontation become ever-more apparent, it will become increasingly difficult for countries to remain outside the tent, peddling the old rhetoric of antagonism. Security, economic and social realities will put increasing pressure on leaderships to become part

of a new, cooperative regional framework, and those who choose not to, will look on as their neighbours move forward without them.

So Bahrain is confident that this process will continue to advance, because it is a process that is so clearly in the interests of the entire international community, regardless of nationality or political affiliation. Already, there has been strong support from around the world for the Abraham Accords, and this international backing will remain vital in highlighting the benefits and opportunities they present.

But on their own, the Accords are mere pieces of paper. Implementation will be critical. That is why both Bahrain and the UAE have repeatedly and publicly declared that we want the Abraham Accords to be the foundations of a “warm peace” with Israel. More than that, we have already moved quickly to put words into action, with a range of cooperation projects across many fields.

Within a few weeks of signing the Accords in September, Bahrain hosted a visit from Israel’s National Security Advisor, Meir Ben Shabbat, and subsequently our Foreign Minister visited Israel in mid-November for talks with the President, Prime Minister and Foreign Minister. Already we have reached agreement on flights between the two countries (up to 14 weekly flights between Bahrain and Tel Aviv, as well as to other airports such as Eilat and Haifa, and up to 5 cargo flights per week) visa arrangements are in place, and the two Embassies will be opening in the near future.

Further, Memoranda of Understanding have been signed in a diverse range of governmental and non-governmental fields. These include, for example:

- MOUs on cooperation between foreign ministries, finance ministries and chambers of commerce;
- Economic and trade cooperation;
- IT and postal services;
- Cooperation in innovation and technology transfer;
- Banking and fintech;
- Renewable energy and green technology.

All of this **in just four short months**, in the midst of a global pandemic!

So it is already clear that this peace and cooperation between Bahrain and Israel will go beyond a narrow interpretation of the Accords. Rather, the two sides have declared their intention for a deep and broad-based cooperation, taking in fields such as trade, investment, entrepreneurship, banking, health, education, communication, technology and innovation, to name just a few.

For Bahrain, this is the best way forward, and one which can maximise the positive impact of the Abraham Accords across the Middle East, for two reasons.

Firstly, because it demonstrates beyond a doubt the **benefits** of a cooperative approach to the region. The quicker we can show a tangible, positive contribution to the lives of our citizens, the more

rapidly we can build popular support and buy-in, both in Bahrain and across the region.

Secondly, because the broader and deeper, the cooperation, the more likely it is to be sustainable, and more incentive the parties have to maintain it. Our foreign minister, Dr. Abdullatif Al Zayani, has spoken in the past of his desire to build interdependence in the region as a means to achieve peace and prosperity and bind willing states into a network of cooperation which gives them every incentive to work constructively together. As the benefits become clear, and as more states potentially join the process, this interdependence will become a reality, and a foundation for regional progress.

At the same time, we must also be realistic enough to know that not everyone will share this goal, and that some state and non-state actors will seize every opportunity to attack and undermine the Abraham Accords and to instead advance their own agendas. Here, I am primarily referring to Iran and its proxies, who have already come out against the Accords, and who seem intent on continuing their efforts to undermine regional stability and interfere in its states internal affairs. That is why it is so important for the international community, including the United Kingdom, to consistently recognise, condemn and challenge such behaviour, and redouble efforts to ensure that the Abraham Accords are a success.

In summary, Bahrain's vision and expectation for the Abraham Accords is that they can be more than just bilateral agreements. Instead, we hope that they can give us the chance to finally bring peace and cooperation to the

Middle East, and at last enable its people to enjoy the opportunity and prosperity that decades of conflict have denied them. These are ambitious goals, of course, but Bahrain will continue to work tirelessly and in good faith with our friends both inside and outside the region to make them a reality.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Of course, no discussion of the Middle East can be credible without addressing the central role of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict to the region's woes over the past decades. So I want now to reaffirm Bahrain's position in support of the Palestinian Cause, and demonstrate why signing the Abraham Accords is not only consistent with this position, but also increases the likelihood of a just and lasting solution which fully safeguards the rights and interests of the Palestinian people.

The Kingdom of Bahrain has been absolutely clear that at the heart of a peaceful and prosperous region must be a resolution of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, one based on a two-state solution that secures the rights of the Palestinian people. This has always been, and remains, the Kingdom of Bahrain's position.

But as I said earlier, it has become very clear that a new approach is needed to reach that goal. So, consistent with the long-term principles and values of our foreign policy, Bahrain believes that the best way to achieve our aim is through constructive dialogue and engagement – through demonstrating the

value of a peaceful, secure and stable region, whose countries and peoples work together to build a common prosperity.

Through dialogue, we have an opportunity to discuss, understand and resolve issues in a way which is simply not possible through confrontation or accusation. And by genuinely engaging in such a process, we have the best possible chance of delivering an outcome that satisfies the aspirations of all sides, and which will be as robust and as durable as possible.

Further, as more states engage in the process started by the Abraham Accords, this will itself create a strong momentum towards achieving peace. And moves towards peace will, in turn, encourage more states to join up. Moreover, this momentum will also make it diplomatically and politically more difficult for any participant to act in a way that might endanger the prospects of peace.

Already, for example, we have seen Israel pause its plans to annex parts of the West Bank, and given the progress over recent months, it is hard to see how – politically – that decision could be reversed.

So in Bahrain's view, the Abraham Accords actually bring the region close to a just, lasting, two-state solution to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict – a solution which has eluded the Middle East and its peoples for too long. And although I can speak only for Bahrain, we believe that – in time - more and more countries and peoples will come around to this perspective, and that September 2020 will be seen as a historic turning point for the region.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I hope that these remarks have given you an overview of the Kingdom of Bahrain's approach to foreign policy over the past five decades, and the values and principles that underpin it. With specific reference to the Abraham Accords, I hope I have also been able to convey a sense of optimism about the potential they hold for the future of our region, and the real chance they give us to move towards a secure, stable and prosperous Middle East, whose peoples genuinely work together to achieve their shared goals and aspirations.

So, finally, and on behalf of His Excellency Ambassador Shaikh Fawaz Bin Mohamed Al Khalifa, may I thank you once again for the opportunity to join you today, and look forward to taking a few questions.

Thank you.