



Israel-UAE Normalization and Suspension of West Bank Annexation

August 19, 2020

President Trump issued a [joint statement](#) on August 13, 2020, with Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu and United Arab Emirates (UAE) Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayid, announcing that Israel and the UAE have agreed to fully normalize their relations, and that Israel is suspending [plans to annex](#) parts of the West Bank. In the coming weeks, Israeli and UAE officials [are expected to begin talks](#) aimed at reaching bilateral agreement on Coronavirus Disease 2019 research, direct airline flights, establishing reciprocal embassies, and other matters. These agreements [could significantly boost](#) both countries' trade and investment in high-tech and other sectors, and have implications for the region and U.S. policy.

Background

Israel-UAE normalization, if implemented, would officially acknowledge contacts that have existed for years. Egypt and Jordan had been the only Arab states with formal diplomatic relations with Israel. Israel established informal ties with a number of [Arab states](#), including [the UAE](#), in the 1990s. [Discreet Israel-UAE links](#) on intelligence, security, and trade [have become closer and more public](#) in the past decade as Israel has worked with various Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states aligned with the United States, including Saudi Arabia, in efforts to counter Iran's regional influence and military capabilities.

[A June 2020 article](#) addressed to the Israeli people from the UAE's ambassador to the United States [reportedly sparked](#) the talks leading to the U.S.-Israel-UAE joint statement. The article implied that closer ties between Israel and Arab states would be possible if Israel refrained from annexing West Bank areas. Other Arab states—[notably Bahrain, Oman, and Sudan](#)—may follow the UAE's lead. Saudi Arabia's leadership role in the Arab and Muslim world and complicated domestic politics [may lead it](#) to approach normalization more cautiously.

Israeli-Palestinian Issues

Some view the Israel-UAE deal as vindicating Prime Minister Netanyahu's long-standing claim that he could normalize Israel's relations with Arab countries before reaching a peace agreement with the

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Palestinians. It also appears to [signal a change](#) to Arab states' previous insistence—in the [2002 Arab Peace Initiative](#)—that Israel address Palestinian negotiating demands as a precondition for improved ties.

It is unclear how long plans for West Bank annexation—endorsed in principle by President Trump's January 2020 [Vision for Peace](#)—might be postponed. Netanyahu has sought to reassure Israeli pro-annexation constituencies that declaring Israeli sovereignty in the West Bank [remains on his agenda](#) pending U.S. approval. [White House Senior Adviser Jared Kushner](#) said that “we do not plan to give our consent for some time.” Even before the deal, Israeli annexation [may not have been likely](#) given [international opposition](#) and [other domestic priorities](#).

Palestinian leaders have [denounced](#) the deal and [withdrew their ambassador](#) from the UAE, arguing that the UAE legitimized Israel's annexation threats by bargaining over them, and thus acquiesced to a [West Bank status quo](#) that [some observers](#) label “de facto annexation.” UAE officials [contend](#) that by significantly delaying Israeli declarations of sovereignty over West Bank areas, they have preserved prospects for future negotiations toward a Palestinian state. [Regional and international reactions](#) to the deal have been mixed, with [some criticism](#) from civil society groups opposed to normalization in GCC states.

UAE Considerations

UAE leaders faced several considerations in deciding to commit to normalizing relations with Israel. They may have judged the domestic political risks of normalization to be relatively low given the lack of discernible unrest amid the decade-long evolution of discreet Israel-UAE ties. In 2015, the UAE public did not obstruct Israel's opening of an office in Abu Dhabi to facilitate Israel's participation in the [International Renewable Energy Agency](#) (IRENA). Israeli ministers, including the Foreign Minister, and security officials have reportedly since [exchanged multiple visits](#) with their UAE counterparts, and Israelis have often visited the UAE to attend professional conferences. The UAE and Israel had no territorial disputes to resolve and—unlike Egypt and Jordan—Emirati forces had not participated in any war against Israel.

The UAE decision to normalize relations with Israel likely reflects a perception that Iran represents a significant threat to both countries and to the region. Iran's allies and proxies in Syria, Lebanon, and the Gaza Strip directly threaten Israeli territory, and Iran's attacks on shipping in the Persian Gulf in 2019, including some UAE-owned tankers, led the UAE to join a U.S.-led naval coalition that was formed to deter such attacks. Israel has played a [role in that operation](#), and a normalization of relations with the UAE could lead Israel to expand that role. Iran's [President Rouhani](#) said that, in agreeing to the normalization, “the UAE has turned itself into a legitimate target for the resistance.”

By committing to normalizing relations with Israel, the UAE leadership is arguably hoping to extract benefits from the U.S. Administration, [no matter the outcome of the upcoming U.S. election](#), as well as advantages in the Gulf and broader region. While some reports have speculated about [possible sales](#) of F-35 aircraft and armed drones to the UAE [proceeding under U.S. laws](#) protecting Israel's [qualitative military edge](#), Netanyahu has responded that [Israel remains opposed](#) to sales to the UAE—including of F-35s—that could tip the military balance. The UAE also might expect that normalization with Israel will reduce some [congressional and other criticism](#) of its actions in the conflict in Yemen and efforts with other GCC states to [isolate neighboring Qatar](#).

Congressional Considerations

[Some Members of Congress](#) have voiced support for the Israel-UAE deal. Congress could consider action on the deal or issues related to it, including support or opposition for the following:

- Israeli-Arab normalization. For example, S. 4482 would require State Department reporting about anti-normalization measures in Arab states.
- U.S. arms sales to Arab states that normalize relations with Israel.

Possible Israeli annexation. For example, H.R. 8050 seeks to prohibit U.S. recognition of and funding related to potential Israeli sovereignty claims in the West Bank.

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