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The Prime Minister's Visit to Oman

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Recent years have witnessed the gradual emergence of closer relations between the State of Israel and a number of “pragmatic” Arab Gulf states, manifested in a growing number of cautious measures of normalization. This process reached a new height with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s recent visit to Oman, the first public visit in 22 years of an Israeli prime minister to the sultanate. To be sure, Israel’s relations with Oman are not new, but the publicity surrounding Netanyahu’s visit – in addition to the official presence of the Israeli judo delegation in Abu Dhabi and the extensive media coverage of Miri Regev, Minister of Culture and Sport, at the event – bespeaks an evolving willingness on the part of some Gulf states to expose more of their relations with Israel in their domestic arenas, and to signal publicly their readiness to move forward gradually in normalizing relations with Israel, albeit subject to concrete progress in the Israeli-Palestinian political process. Oman holds tools to assist in the political process, if only due to its current capacity as the only actor that enjoys some level of confidence from both Israel and the Palestinian Authority. Israel would be wise to take advantage of its achievements in the regional arena and leverage the significant improvement in its regional status, particularly its improved relations with Oman, in pursuit of its strategic interests.

Recent years have witnessed the gradual emergence of closer relations between the State of Israel and a number of “pragmatic” Arab Gulf states, manifested in a growing number of cautious measures of normalization. This process reached a new height with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s recent visit to Oman, the first public visit in 22 years of an Israeli prime minister to the sultanate (Yitzhak Rabin visited Oman in 1994, and Shimon Peres visited in 1996). In addition, Netanyahu reportedly reached Oman by flying over Saudi Arabia.

Oman’s foreign relations differ strongly from those of other Gulf states. As ruler, Sultan Qaboos bin Said has channeled the income from oil to an immense development enterprise and begun implementing a neutral foreign policy. This strategy was devised to counter the sultanate’s relative weakness, notwithstanding its strategic location. Oman maintains extremely close relations with Iran – much closer than those of its neighbors in the Gulf – and uses these relations vis-à-vis Saudi Arabia, as Oman would like to

constrain Riyadh's political and religious influence. Qaboos's close relations with Iran also contributed to the formulation of the nuclear deal with Iran, when early on Oman served as a "go-between"/facilitator in the negotiations between representatives of the United States and Iran.

Oman's special relationship with Israel, which began already in the 1970s, can be attributed to this foreign policy that is highly unusual in the Arab arena. Unlike its neighbors in the Gulf, Oman's relations with Israel over the years have been characterized *inter alia* by the continuation of cooperative efforts in the realm of water, as a result of the Madrid process, and by military support that Israel reportedly provided to Oman even in years when open relations between Israel and the Gulf states were severed due to the crisis in the political process with the Palestinians. Netanyahu's visit to Oman apparently focused on the Israeli-Palestinian political process, and his visit followed a visit by Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas. At the same time, the visit points to Israel's ability to receive assistance from Oman on other issues as well, reportedly including conveying messages to Syria and Iran. Netanyahu's visit to Oman may also be able to pave the way for other Gulf states to follow the sultanate's lead and engage in additional confidence building measures with Israel.

The Prime Minister's visit to Oman should be regarded as another stage in advancing normalization between Israel and the Arab states, despite the fact that Israel's increasingly close relations with Oman are developing against a different background than what underlies its improving relations with other Gulf countries – those who share Israel's view of Iran as a major threat. Israel's military activity against Iran to prevent it from consolidating its presence in Syria, Israel's close cooperation with the Trump administration in opposition to the nuclear agreement with Iran, and the intelligence and perhaps also operational assistance that Israel provided to the Gulf states have led them to the conclusion that Israel is an important element in the defense of their national interests. At the same time, the centrality of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is gradually eroding in the regional policies of a number of the Gulf states, and thus conditioning relations with Israel on solving the conflict has also waned. Manifestations of this phenomenon can be found in the minor and restrained responses of these countries to a series of significant measures taken by the Trump administration that reflected pronounced support of Israel.

In contrast, Oman assigns great importance to the Israeli-Palestinian issue (and is presumably troubled by the possibility of a military clash between the United States and Iran) and has therefore devoted itself to an initiative to revive the political process. It is doing so by taking advantage of its special relationship with Israel and with the United States in an attempt to soften the Palestinians' position toward the US and perhaps also persuade the parties to return to the negotiating table. Oman has proven that even against

the background of the ongoing political stalemate, and in a reality in which Saudi Arabia downplays its developing relations with Israel and Iran is in the midst of a direct confrontation with Israel in the Syrian and Gazan arenas, it is nonetheless capable of deepening its relations with Israel and is willing to try to break the impasse in the political process.

Thus while Israel's relations with Oman are not new, the publicity surrounding Netanyahu's visit – in addition to the official presence of the Israeli judo delegation in Abu Dhabi (even if it was forced upon the country by the International Judo Federation) and the extensive media coverage of Miri Regev, Minister of Culture and Sport, at the event – bespeaks an evolving willingness on the part of some Gulf states to expose more of their relations with Israel in their domestic arenas, and to signal publicly their readiness to move forward gradually in normalizing relations with Israel, albeit subject to concrete progress in the political process.

Netanyahu's visit presumably reflected Oman's desire to accommodate the US administration in the context of the Trump administration's "deal of the century" regarding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The administration is almost certainly pressuring the Gulf states to accelerate such expressions of normalization with Israel to make it easier for the Israeli leadership to expand its legitimacy on the home front and accept the initiative, once presented, with as few reservations as possible. Oman holds tools to assist in the political process, if only due to its current capacity as the only actor that enjoys some level of confidence from both Israel and the Palestinian Authority. Whereas the Palestinian leadership has stated on more than one occasion that the United States is no longer an honest broker, Oman's Foreign Minister confirmed Oman's support for President Trump and for the United States role in reviving the negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians. The Omani action, joining expressions of normalization by other states in the Gulf, may help soften the Palestinian positions regarding renewed negotiations with Israel and weaken the expected opposition to measures implemented by the US administration.

Israel achieved noted diplomatic success in publicity of the visit, even if the visit itself fails to yield concrete results in the Palestinian context. And to be sure, progress in the political process depends first and foremost on the ability of the sides themselves to bridge the significant gaps between them, and much less on Oman's albeit considerable diplomatic abilities.

The Israeli government seeks to promote a paradigm ("from outside in") that includes closer relations with the Arab and Islamic countries with which it does not have relations. The goal is to weaken the Palestinian Authority by depriving it of its ability to obstruct

the progress of normalization in the Arab states' relations with Israel and veto the renewal of the political process, and to promote a settlement in the Gaza Strip under conditions that are favorable to Israel. Qatar's efforts to promote a settlement between Israel and Hamas, conducted in coordination with Israel, harms the status of the Palestinian Authority, as the cooperation between two bitter rivals of the PA weakens its ability to pressure the Gaza Strip and prevent a settlement between Israel and Hamas that bypasses it. As such – and specifically due to the fact that, unlike in the past, what is at stake is not a solution to the conflict itself but rather an attempt to advance the process as a condition for closer relations between Israel and the Arab states – Prime Minister Netanyahu's public visit to Oman provided a tailwind for his policy, which calls for closer relations with the Arab world, before or in parallel to the political process with the Palestinians.

Israel would be wise to take advantage of its achievements in the regional arena and leverage the significant improvement in its regional status, particularly its improved relations with Oman, in pursuit of its strategic interests. It is therefore important for it to support the US administration and recognize the importance of "the deal of the century." The support of the Gulf states for the deal sought eagerly by the Trump administration can be enhanced by leveraging Oman's possible role in reducing the tension between the Palestinian Authority and the US administration.