

INSS Insight No. 1339, June 23, 2020

Israel, the Gulf States, and Annexation

Yoel Guzansky

Debates are currently underway in Arab countries regarding Israel's possible application of sovereignty in parts of the West Bank. In an exceptional manner, even if not unprecedented, prominent figures from the Gulf states have made a public and direct appeal to the Israeli public. Anwar Gargash, the United Arab Emirates Minister of State for Foreign Affairs; Yousef al-Otaiba, the UAE ambassador to the United States; and Nawaf Obaid, an academic and former advisor to the Saudi government presented the position of their respective countries directly and publicly on the issue. Their messages were not uniform, and at times contradictory, and they appear to have been formulated in a manner that gives the Gulf states a degree of maneuverability regarding the annexation issue and relations with Israel. Against this background, it is necessary to ask whether, and to what extent, annexation will negatively affect Israel's relations with the Gulf states. The answer reflects the dual nature of the relations between Israel and a number of these states as they have emerged over the years: their public opposition to the annexation will likely continue, but so will their quiet security cooperation with Israel, particularly in light of the common interest of curbing Iran's regional and nuclear aspirations.

Relations between Israel and the Gulf states have evolved over the past decades, and particularly in recent years, through a number of separate and parallel yet sometimes overlapping channels: a security-intelligence channel, which by nature remains covert; an economic-trade channel, which has also been kept tacit; and in recent years, a channel of inter-religious and inter-cultural dialogue. Alongside the secrecy that is largely typical of these relations, the years have also witnessed the emergence of some public ties, which while relatively less developed today include meetings between senior figures from both sides – primarily involving former practitioners – and the exchange of public messages. During periods of progress in the Israeli-Palestinian track, there have been relations that were more public than they are today, and included the opening of official Israeli representative offices in Oman and Qatar. The volatility of relations – that is, the alternating closer and more distant relations – reflects the reaction to Israel's policy in the Palestinian context and demonstrates the positive correlation from the perspective of the

Gulf states between elements of normalization with Israel and Israeli measures that are seen to advance a settlement with the Palestinians.

Given this dynamic, Israeli annexation can be expected to prompt the Gulf states to roll back different aspects of normalization with Israel, particularly the public aspects – notwithstanding that the Palestinian issue does not figure among the top priorities in the Gulf, and despite suspicion and sometimes even hostility toward the Palestinian Authority and Hamas. Still, remarks by senior figures in the Gulf states are presumably not merely lip service, and various existing aspects of normalization with Israel will be damaged. Moreover, the scope of the annexation and the intensity of the opposition to the measure throughout the Arab world will likely shape the contours of the impact on Israel-Gulf relations. However, while it too would be affected by worsening relations, quiet security cooperation will likely not be upset in a significant and ongoing manner. At the same time, because Israel has, over the years, assigned great importance to the public nature of relations with Arab states, especially those with which Israel does not enjoy official relations despite shared their common interests, weakening of the public ties that have emerged over the years through great effort will be of negative strategic significance for Israel.

The Israeli press recently published articles by Yousef al-Otaiba, the UAE ambassador to the United States (*Yediot Ahronot*, June 12, 2020), and former Saudi advisor Nawaf Obaid (*Haaretz*, June 16, 2020), that contain direct appeals to the Israeli public. In these op-eds, which in themselves are a sign of normalization, the authors seek to dissuade Israel from annexing territory in the West Bank, and even question the future of relations with Israel in the event that the annexation occurs. At the same time, Israel is implicitly offered upgraded relations in the event that it abandons the intended annexation. Otaiba likewise linked relations with Israel to the discourse of tolerance and inter-religious dialogue in the Arab world in recent years and hinted that these too would be significantly undermined. He also mentioned the authorization that was granted to the Indian airline to fly to and from Israel over Saudi airspace as a (modest) gesture toward Israel that could be revoked in the event of annexation.

A somewhat different approach to annexation was conveyed by Anwar Gargash, the UAE Minister for Foreign Affairs, in remarks at a meeting of the American Jewish Committee (June 14-18, 2020). Gargash expressed opposition to unilateral Israeli measures and support for Israeli-Palestinian negotiations. However, he distinguished between disagreements with Israel on the Palestinian issue and the ability and need to cooperate with Israel on other regional issues: “We can disagree with Israel on political issues and still cooperate in other areas, such as the coronavirus and technological

matters,” he said. Nonetheless, Gargash added that cooperation with Israel did not change the UAE position regarding the issue on the agenda: opposition to annexation.

Otaiba’s article and Gargash’s remarks were sharply criticized in the social media, particularly by Palestinians. Otaiba was criticized for describing Israel as “an opportunity, not an enemy” and promising it diverse compensation if it refrains from “the illegal seizure of Palestinian land.” Gargash was criticized for giving Israel implied assurances regarding continued cooperation even if it does carry out annexation. Clearly Gulf leaders fear that their status in the Arab world will suffer and that public unrest will undermine the stability of their regimes if they fail to express resolute opposition to annexation, while Iran and Turkey – regional rivals of the Gulf states – would likely score points for their opposition to annexation. In contrast, Gulf states could be perceived not only as abandoning the Palestinians but as collaborating with Israel.

The Gulf states’ position vis-à-vis the Palestinian issue is dynamic and has evolved over the past two decades. The Gulf states formerly hinged relations with Israel on a comprehensive peace agreement between Israel and the Palestinians. However, this threshold has eroded in recent years, and today, positions are closer to that presented by Obaid – that progress on the Palestinian front will be met by an improvement in public ties with Israel. To a large degree, this position is a compromise between the Israeli position and the Palestinian position. In recent years, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has sought to prioritize improved relations with the Gulf states and the Maghreb over the Palestinian channel (“from outside in”). Supporters of this strategy have argued that it serves to pressure the Palestinians to demonstrate flexibility and agree to a political compromise, whereas critics have argued that it is actually intended to put an end to the political process. Regardless, the Palestinians have taken steps to restrain acts of normalization between Israel and the Arab states, and especially the Gulf states, in order to maintain them as a bargaining chip vis-à-vis Israel.

The statements by the three senior figures are consistent with the duality that has characterized the Gulf interaction with Israel for many years. This duality also reflects the aspirations of the Gulf states to maintain good relations with Washington, especially in light of the threat they face from Iran. Their ability to establish closer relations with Israel and make them public is limited by the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian political deadlock. However, the shared threats have preserved the primarily covert cooperation between the sides, and the annexation, even if it is carried out, is not expected to erode the quiet security cooperation significantly. In any event, Iran stands to gain from the implementation of Israel’s annexation plan in the West Bank. Not only would annexation divert attention from its progress toward military nuclear capacity, but it would also make it difficult for Israel to mobilize international legitimacy for actions against it.

Thus there is not necessarily a contradiction between the words of the three senior figures who addressed the issue of possible annexation. Annexation, if implemented, will not result in a sweeping severance of the relations between Israel and the Gulf but will no doubt impede the ability to advance public cooperation. Despite their ties with Israel, the Gulf states cannot turn their backs on the Palestinian ethos. From their perspective, even if there is no political progress between Israel and the Palestinians, the status quo allows them to focus on more urgent problems at home and abroad. It is unclear whether Israel has been promised anything in return if it reduces or abandons the planned annexation. However, it is doubtful whether this would be significant, as in the view of the Gulf states they have already moved far enough toward Israel in the present situation, as long as the Israeli-Palestinian track remains dormant.