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**The UAE and Israel: Normalization over Annexation, and Denial of a  
Palestinian Veto**

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**On August 13, 2020, a significant breakthrough between Israel and the United Arab Emirates was announced on the road to the establishment of full relations. The agreement, under the auspices of the United States, is an important reinforcement for the moderate pragmatic camp in the region against Iran and both Shiite and Sunni radicals. Vis-à-vis the Palestinians, the agreement removes the issue of unilateral annexation from the agenda, and improves opening conditions for negotiations and a future arrangement.**

On August 13, 2020, a significant breakthrough was announced, under the auspices of the United States, on the road toward full relations between Israel and the United Arab Emirates. Forty-one years after the peace treaty with Egypt was signed, and 26 years after the peace treaty with the Kingdom of Jordan, the United Arab Emirates joins the small group of pragmatic countries that not only share interests with Israel, but are also prepared to conduct relations with it publicly and officially.

Alongside the likeness between the new agreement and the two peace treaties, there are important differences between them. The agreement with Egypt was part of a dramatic strategic reversal, when the largest and strongest of the Arab countries, with which Israel had fought five wars, turned from an enemy into a peaceful neighbor and from a country under Soviet protection to a partner of the United States. While Jordan was an enemy in the 1948 War of Independence and the 1967 Six Day War, it later conducted quiet strategic relations with Israel until the peace treaty was signed in 1994, which in turn enabled a marked progression of strategic relations between the two countries. Israel shares its longest borders with these two neighbors, as well as an interest in the Israel-Palestinian dispute, in particular, with the Gaza Strip on one side and the West Bank and Jerusalem on the other.

The agreement with the United Arab Emirates is not a strategic reversal, but rather brings out into the open the country's far-reaching relations with Israel, which have been conducted for decades in a low profile to mutual advantage. The important breakthrough now will enable those relations to expand and deepen, and will make it somewhat easier

for other countries in the region, such as Bahrain, Oman, and perhaps later even Saudi Arabia, Sudan, and Morocco to follow suit. In contrast to the “cold peace” that developed with Egypt and Jordan in the wake of the peace treaties, mainly against the background of the ongoing conflict with the Palestinians, there is room for cautious optimism that with the Emirates the situation will be better.

In terms of the breakthrough's linkage to the conflict with the Palestinians, some will see it as vindicating Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's approach of “from outside in,” that is, seeing arrangements between Israel and the countries of the region as a preliminary step, if not an alternative to an arrangement with the Palestinians. The new agreement turns on its head the principle underpinning the Arab Peace Initiative of 2002 – first a solution to the conflict with the Palestinians, and only then Arab normalization with Israel, a principle that did not help at all to advance a solution. The step by the UAE has aroused tremendous anger among Palestinian leaderships; extremist Sunnis, namely, Turkey and Qatar; and radical Shiites – Iran, Hezbollah, and the Houthis, whose hostility toward Israel is more important to them than the good of the Palestinians. In contrast, the step was welcomed by Egyptian President el-Sisi and by Jordan, which is relieved by the cancellation of annexation plans and its release from the serious dilemmas and crises that would inevitably ensue. However, Jordan again emphasized its commitment to a solution to the Palestinian problem, which is critical for it.

To be sure, the agreement was not reached in isolation from the Palestinian issue, but in exchange for the cancellation of Israel's intention to unilaterally annex areas within the West Bank. In addition, the agreement's implementation process leaves potential for additional leverage in the future, such as a UAE clarification that there will be no embassy in Jerusalem before the conflict is resolved. Throughout the gradual, detailed stages of the agreement's realization, the parties will remain flexible in view of developments, which will give the UAE greater influence over Israel than in the past. The UAE may also increase its effort to advance its position in the Palestinian sphere, particularly after the Abu Mazen era ends in the Palestinian Authority, including through Muhammad Dahlan, who enjoys close relations with the crown prince and acting ruler of the UAE, Sheikh Muhammad bin Zayed. The section inviting all peace-loving Muslims to al Aqsa is also important, in that it signals to the Muslim world that the only way to Jerusalem runs through peace with Israel.

The normalization process between Israel and the UAE originated with the understanding in Washington, and perhaps also in Jerusalem, that despite claims to the contrary, unilateral annexation was not consistent with President Trump's peace plan, and even undermined it. President Trump's peace team understood that the plan was deadlocked after the Palestinians rebuffed it and the pragmatic Arab countries did not support it as

cover for a unilateral Israeli annexation. In that situation, Washington, Jerusalem, and Abu Dhabi identified an opportunity for a positive step, partial though it was, as an alternative to a resounding defeat.

Instead of unilateral annexation, the three leaders came to an agreement that serves each of them in his own way. President Trump won an important foreign policy achievement leading up to the presidential elections in November, in sharp contrast with the significant difficulties facing him on various fronts and the coronavirus crisis. No less important, the agreement removed the risk to the peace plan that he presented, i.e., unilateral annexation by the Israeli government.

For his part, Prime Minister Netanyahu demonstrated creative diplomacy, and drawing on his close relations with President Trump, was able to turn the annexation from a poisonous asset into a fruitful one, by removing it from the table (or as he insisted to the Israeli public, “postponing it”). This took place as fourth elections to the Knesset are seen as increasingly possible, and as the state of the Israeli economy and the other effects of the Covid-19 crisis, as well as the public demonstrations, are bad news from Netanyahu’s standpoint. In Israel, the agreement earned many plaudits. A clear majority of Knesset members and most of the public support it, despite the prolonged political crisis. On the margins, the extreme right is opposed, since in its view, stopping the annexation is a missed historic opportunity for sovereignty over parts of the homeland and terminating the option of a Palestinian state. In contrast, the Joint List (the Arab parties) expressed opposition, echoing the tradition of refusal by the Palestinians and their supporters.

Sheikh Muhammad bin Zayed, who apparently assessed that the public and regional cost of the agreement would be low, was obviously intent on the strategic, economic, and security benefits to the UAE from the United States and Israel, and perhaps also on improving his country’s image in Washington in the contexts of the war in Yemen and the UAE’s connections with China and Russia. The very fact of the agreement illustrates that the UAE is putting its national interests ahead of sterile solidarity with Palestinian rejectionism, and is refusing to continue subjugating them to obstacles to arrangements in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. As such, the UAE neutralizes the Palestinian veto over its foreign relations and shapes them as it sees fit.

The United Arab Emirates, a small, advancing country in the Gulf, is worried about threats to its national and regional security, both from Iran and its proxies and from Turkey and Qatar. These are concerns that it shares with Israel. The partnership with Israel, and the strengthening of the partnership with the US, may also facilitate its drive to acquire high-quality weapons, both defensive and offensive. Indeed, the US recently removed export restrictions on armed UAVs, and the UAE would at the very least be

eager to vary its armed UAV fleet that is currently based on Chinese systems, and perhaps also to acquire F-35 stealth fighter jets. Easing restrictions on weapons exports to the Gulf requires Israel's attention to the entire range of related issues, including Israel's defense exports, competition with Western manufacturers, perhaps in coordination with the US, and maintenance of Israel's qualitative military edge in the region under the new circumstances. The significant potential in UAE investments in Israel will presumably be reviewed by the advisory committee supervising foreign investments that is of special importance, mainly in the context of China.

Following the announcement of the agreement, signing ceremonies are expected on the White House lawn, in tandem with work by professional teams on the details of the formal relationship between Jerusalem and Abu Dhabi, as well as other areas. However, at stake is not a celebratory wedding ceremony, but daily life together over time. Israel must manage the process with the UAE smartly, illustrating the fruits of peace and its potential benefits to other countries that are still hesitant to formalize relations with it.

While the number of rulers in the Middle East who have grown tired of subjugating their policy to Palestinian rejectionism has grown, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict remains an important consideration in managing the domestic challenges in their countries. The conflict is certainly not the core of instability in the region and its resolution will not remedy all of the region's maladies, but for Israel and the Palestinians it is important, and even existential. Israel's developing relations with the pragmatic countries provide additional potential for improving the situation and advancing conditions for an arrangement when they ripen. Shelving the annexation does not mean that Israel is surrendering its demands regarding borders and security arrangements. Those will be discussed and agreed upon when the time comes, through negotiations and not unilaterally.

The bottom line is that the agreement between Israel and the United Arab Emirates, sponsored by the United States, is an important achievement for Israel's national security and a breakthrough in the geopolitical situation in the Middle East. It reflects an important strengthening of the moderate and pragmatic camp against Iran and radical Shiite and Sunni forces in the region; removes the issue of unilateral annexation from the agenda, thereby expanding the circle of peace in the region; and creates improved opening conditions for negotiations and a future Israeli-Palestinian arrangement.