

THE POSITIONS OF THE UAE AND BAHRAIN ON ISRAELI–SAUDI NORMALIZATION: PARTNERSHIP AND COMPETITION

ILAN ZALAYET AND YOEL GUZANSKY*

As signatories to the Abraham Accords, the United Arab Emirates and the Kingdom of Bahrain are expected to support an Israeli–Saudi normalization agreement, which does not contradict the Abraham Accords and even complements them. Moreover, these countries have pro-American leaderships that maintain neighborly and friendly relations with Saudi Arabia—especially Bahrain, which relies on Riyadh as its patron. That said, various considerations will guide both states in assessing their positions if and when such an agreement is signed, including their relationships with Israel, Saudi Arabia, the United States, and even Iran—and in Bahrain’s case, its internal political situation.

United Arab Emirates

The UAE’s central national goals—similar to those of Saudi Arabia—are calm and stability, which will allow it to continue using its oil revenues for internal economic development and prosperity. Against this backdrop, and especially as the pioneer of the Abraham Accords, the UAE’s official position is that these agreements should be expanded to include additional countries. It is likely that the UAE believes such expansion would grant further legitimacy to its own normalization with Israel. This position was expressed, without explicitly naming Saudi Arabia, at the [Negev Forum](#) held in January 2023 and at the [UAE Security Forum](#) in July 2022. Even after the outbreak of the Israel–Hamas war in October 2023, the chairman of the UAE’s National Defense and Foreign Relations Committee, Ali Rashid Al Nuaimi, [stated](#) that

* Ilan Zalayet—Neubauer Fellow, Institute for National Security Studies
Dr. Yoel Guzansky—Senior Research Fellow, Institute for National Security Studies

in his country's view, the Abraham Accords are not limited to the UAE and Israel, but are a platform that should reshape the region "so that everyone enjoys security, stability, and prosperity."

This does not mean that Israeli–Saudi normalization would not arouse envy and competition among the Emirati leadership, as it would lose its uniqueness as the trailblazer of normalization and model for its success. There may be concern in Abu Dhabi that Israel will prioritize its relationship with Riyadh over its ties with Abu Dhabi. In addition, the UAE is engaged in a "cold" rivalry with Saudi Arabia (possibly even on a personal level, between their leaders Mohammed bin Zayed and Mohammed bin Salman) over political stature and economic influence. In particular, the Saudis are attempting to attract a share of the companies, foreign investments, and tourism currently enjoyed by the UAE—especially by the emirate of Dubai, which over the years has become a global economic, commercial, and tourism hub. Furthermore, in the case of Israeli–Saudi normalization, the UAE would lose its unique status within the region in terms of ties with Israel and Washington and as a constructive actor in promoting stability and peace in the Middle East. Abu Dhabi would also lose the relative advantage it has in its economic competition with Saudi Arabia, stemming from its trade with Israel and Israeli tourism.

However, these are not costs the UAE cannot bear, particularly if it can leverage an Israeli–Saudi agreement to enhance its diplomatic prestige in the region and the world—as a state whose path even the great Saudi Arabia is following. The litmus test for how such an agreement might be received in Abu Dhabi is the nature of the Israeli concessions to the Palestinians—and no less important, the American concessions to the Saudis—namely, whether these are more impressive than those achieved by the UAE in 2020. In any case, the UAE is unlikely to resent Israeli–Saudi normalization even if it is advanced with a more prominent Palestinian component than that of the Abraham Accords. Evidence of this position can be found [in remarks](#) made by senior diplomat and advisor to the UAE President, Dr. Anwar Gargash, in

September 2023, who stated that the Abraham Accords were not intended to resolve the Palestinian issue.

On the other hand, the UAE may demand from the United States “parity” in weapons systems—and more significantly, in nuclear permissions that Saudi Arabia might receive in exchange for its relationship with Israel. Reportedly, Riyadh is demanding from the United States permission to maintain a nuclear capability far more expansive than the “gold standard” agreement that Abu Dhabi signed with Washington in 2009 (which significantly impedes progress toward military nuclear capabilities). If Riyadh receives approval from Washington for uranium enrichment on its soil, the UAE may seek to reopen its agreement with the U.S. on the matter, which could raise fears of a regional nuclear arms race and complicate U.S. congressional approval of Israeli–Saudi normalization. A hint of this can be seen in a [tender](#) the UAE issued in 2024 for the construction of additional nuclear reactors—signaling that it will no longer rely solely on South Korea—which is subject to U.S. oversight—as was the case with the construction of its first four reactors, but is now opening the door to potential participation by Chinese and Russian firms.

Above all, the UAE is likely to be preoccupied with the response of Iran and its proxies to Israeli–Saudi normalization, particularly if it includes a U.S.–Saudi defense agreement that Iran will perceive as a threat. While Abu Dhabi still views Iran and its proxies as its primary security threat—and even seeks to expand the security agreement it signed with the U.S. in September 2024—it does not wish to disrupt its reconciliation process with Tehran, which it has worked hard to establish. It understands that regional conflicts will harm it even if it does not participate directly. A concrete threat to the UAE in this context is the collapse of the ceasefire in Yemen if Saudi Arabia signs a normalization agreement with Israel without first securing a stable peace with the Houthis. Such a collapse could lead to the Houthis seizing strategic areas in southern Yemen currently controlled by UAE-backed forces—and

in an extreme scenario, could even result in Houthi missiles fire toward the UAE, as occurred in early 2022.

Bahrain

The national interests of Bahrain, the second Gulf state to normalize relations with Israel, focus on preserving the survival of the regime, ensuring its stability, and achieving economic prosperity. The Bahraini government does not possess the same economic strength as its counterparts in Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Qatar, and unlike them, it does not enjoy broad public support—particularly from the Shiite majority population, which is alienated from the Sunni royal family. Bahrain’s decision-making is driven by a constant fear of popular uprising, as occurred during the Arab Spring in 2011, and of Iran, which supports segments of the Shiite opposition in the kingdom. Bahrain is the only Gulf state that has yet to renew ties with Tehran after it and other Gulf states severed relations in 2016. Under these circumstances, Bahrain has effectively become a protectorate of Saudi Arabia, and to a lesser extent, of the UAE. Both have provided economic support to the regime in Manama and even deployed military forces to suppress the 2011 uprising. In addition, Bahrain maintains close ties with the United States for protection from Iran: It hosts the U.S. Navy’s Fifth Fleet, and was in fact the first Gulf state to sign a comprehensive security agreement with the United States in September 2023, which did not require congressional approval.

Accordingly, at the governmental level, Bahrain is expected to support any initiative led by its Saudi patron and would particularly welcome a Saudi–American defense agreement that would bolster Washington’s security presence in the Gulf, as Bahrain has a vital interest in strengthening the Saudi regime. Indeed, an op-ed in Bahrain’s state-affiliated Al-Bilad newspaper in February 2024 argued that “despite Israel’s crimes in Gaza,” Gulf states should continue the normalization process with Israel as a means of ensuring security and stability, given Iran’s threats and influence in the region, and in light of shifts

in U.S. Middle East policy. Manama’s only request, also [expressed](#) in a state-affiliated newspaper article, is that the United States assist it in addressing internal threats and not prevent Bahrain or Saudi Arabia from dealing with such threats on the grounds of human rights violations (in this context, the article noted the Obama administration’s condemnation of the suppression of protests in Bahrain in 2011).

Among the public in Bahrain, however, the picture is quite different. The majority of the kingdom’s citizens oppose normalization with Israel: a 2022 poll found that only about twenty percent supported it, with no distinction between Sunnis and Shiites—and that figure has likely dropped further due to the war in Gaza. Whereas about forty percent of Bahrainis believed normalization would have a positive impact when the agreement was first signed, that number halved within three years. The vocal opposition is led by the popular Shiite opposition movement Al-Wefaq (which has been outlawed and whose leaders have been arrested or exiled), which also appeals to publics in other countries considering normalization. The movement’s spiritual leader, Ayatollah Isa Qassim, who resides in Iran, described the Hamas attack on October 7, as a lesson to governments normalizing with Israel—one that shattered the illusion of Israeli power, and thus the supposed need for normalization, which he said contradicts religious faith.

Furthermore, the Bahraini opposition has long viewed Saudi Arabia and U.S. forces in the Gulf as enablers of the Bahraini regime’s human rights abuses and obstacles to reform and liberalization (regarding Saudi Arabia, the 2011 suppressions of protest served to reinforce this view). Since the signing of the Abraham Accords, it has been argued that ties with Israel also serve this purpose, due to the rapid cooperation formed between the Bahraini government and Israel. In the small but persistent protests by Al-Wefaq supporters in Bahrain, the demand to end internal repression is coupled with calls to sever relations with Israel. Therefore, an agreement that deepens military ties between the United States and Saudi Arabia—especially if it includes Israel, but even if it

does not—may be perceived by many Bahrainis as a threat to their freedom and could lead to vocal protests.

However, neither the Bahraini public nor the opposition holds the power to derail an agreement signed by Saudi Arabia, just as they have not threatened or disrupted Bahrain’s normalization with Israel thus far. The Bahraini regime frequently claims that Iranian Revolutionary Guards are operating among the Shiite population in the country, but it is unclear how accurate these claims are or whether they primarily serve as a pretext for suppressing the opposition. During the Swords of Iron war, an unknown organization called the “Al-Ashtar Brigades”—which presents itself as a Bahraini militia affiliated with the Axis of Resistance—released a video of a drone launch from Bahrain toward Israel in response to the war in Gaza, and called on Bahraini citizens to attack Israeli diplomatic representatives in the kingdom. However, it appears that the video was not filmed in Bahrain, and it is unlikely that there is any armed group or effective Iranian infiltration in the country capable of disrupting Saudi normalization efforts with Israel.