

A breakthrough in relations between Israel, the United Arab Emirates & Bahrain

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On 15 September a Treaty on Peace, Diplomatic Relations and Full Normalisation between Israel and the United Arab Emirates, a Declaration of Peace between Israel and Bahrain, as well as the 'Abrahamic Agreements', a joint declaration between Israel, the UAE & Bahrain with the US as a witness, were signed in Washington, stating a desire to build peace, security and prosperity based on tolerance, dialogue and cooperation. These treaties are a consequence of the declaration on 13 August of the normalisation of Israel/UAE relations, the work on bilateral agreements building a relationship infrastructure in a number of areas, and Israel's suspension of its planned 'extension of sovereignty' to part of the Palestinian territories. On 11 September Bahrain also expressed its willingness to establish relations with Israel.

Commentary

- The UAE and Bahrain have become the first Gulf Arab states to establish formal relations with Israel. This political and psychological breakthrough is the culmination of a long-standing process of developing unofficial ties in the fields of security, trade, technology and inter-religious dialogue. The establishment of relations consolidates a bloc of countries which are determined to counter Iran's revisionist aspirations in the Middle East (as manifested by its involvement in civil wars in Syria and Yemen, its support for Hezbollah and Hamas, and the obstruction of free passage in the Strait of Hormuz) and the possibility that it may acquire nuclear weapons. The importance of the Iranian issue, as well as the concern about the policies Turkey has conducted in recent years, have led the Arab states to decide to 'cross the Rubicon' in their relations with Israel without waiting for a solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The parties to the treaties have also been motivated by the significant potential for economic and technological cooperation with Israel in relation to the demographic and climate challenges they face.
- Despite the existence of unofficial contacts between Israel and the Gulf states, the formal declaration of relations would not have taken place without the involvement of the United States. This is part of the US's long-term efforts to create a new regional relationship architecture for which Iran is the reference point. From Washington's perspective, this is important not only for the security of Israel, but also in the broader context of reorienting its own resources to compete with China and reducing its presence in the Middle East. The rapprochement between Israel and the Gulf states allied to the US is ultimately intended to get these states to assume greater responsibility for regional

security. At the same time, the US electoral calendar has served as a catalyst for the normalisation process. President Donald Trump wanted to achieve diplomatic success in the Middle East as the electorate which is interested in Israel's affairs is crucial to his chances of re-election. This goal should originally have been achieved thanks to the Middle East Peace Plan announced in January, although it proved too controversial, and also proved impossible to implement quickly. Establishing relations between Israel and selected Arab states under US auspices is a lower-ranking event, but it brings no controversial elements with it, and has earned Trump the goodwill of both his Democratic rival and the EU.

- For Israel, establishing official relations with the UAE and Bahrain (and probably with other Arab states in the longer term) is an undoubted success. The agreement symbolically confirms its 'citizenship' within the Middle East; strengthens the security of the state; weakens the arguments of its critics (both within the region and in the West, including the BDS boycott movement); and finally, it opens up attractive economic prospects. The price of this success does not seem excessive: in the long term, this normalisation will not hinder Israel in its policy towards the West Bank (the agreement is conditional not on renouncing the annexation, but merely suspending it for four years). The most difficult element for Israel of this agreement was the reported demand to withdraw its veto over the UAE's ability to buy American F-35 multifunctional aircraft, arms which until now were only possessed by Israel in the region. Paradoxically, Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu's chances of capitalising on this success in domestic politics are rather limited. This is because the most important topics in Israel right now are the currently very poor COVID situation and its economic impact, which will push the government's diplomatic triumphs into the background.
- There is nothing new about regional cooperation between Arab states and Israel brought about by Iranian (and to a lesser extent Turkish) expansion. However, when such cooperation is open and official, it becomes an increasingly important part of the ties within the Gulf, the Eastern Mediterranean and the Red Sea regions. On the one hand, this new situation will promote the stabilisation of these regions in the long term; on the other, though, it may provoke the actors targeted to escalate their activities. Attention should be paid to Saudi Arabia's acceptance of the ongoing process of normalisation, and to the Egyptian government's positive response to this process. It is not inconceivable that more Arab countries will join it later this year. However, it is important that the endorsements of the new treaties have been accompanied by declarations of unbending support for the creation of a Palestinian state in the territories of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. The agreements themselves underline the importance of peace-building in the region as a whole, taking care to refer to the Palestinian question in the preambles (the need to negotiate a fair, comprehensive, realistic and lasting solution, empowered in the context of the Trump Plan and Israel's existing peace agreements with Egypt & Jordan). Yet in view of the Palestinian leadership's negative response to the normalisation process, as well as the internal problems in Israel, it is not clear whether the current developments will help in reactivating the Israeli-Palestinian peace process. At the same time, the success of the bilateral cooperation between the UAE & Bahrain with Israel – not only in matters of security, but also in the fields of the economy and development – will be of great importance to the progress of regional cooperation which

will be broader, more pragmatic, and bring about stability in the Middle East.