

The Gulf States Relations with Israel and Trump's Plan for Peace

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Introduction

The reaction of the Gulf States to US President Trump's Peace to Prosperity Plan – also known as the deal of the century – can be summarised in one sentence: the Gulf States support peace between the Palestinians and Israelis, but not the Peace Plan proposed. However, because the Plan is widely believed to have been put forth in the context of increased ties between Israel and the Gulf States – of which, mainly, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Bahrain, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) and Oman – there is a belief that these states might exert pressure on the Palestinians to accept the Plan. Furthermore, there is a belief that the Gulf States are actively working to normalise relations with Israel.

The analysis below will focus primarily on the evolution of the relations between Israel and both the UAE and KSA in order to advance three main arguments. The first is that the Gulf States will not accept a Plan that is rejected by the Palestinians. Further, any pressure they might impose on the Palestinians related to this Plan will be time-bound to the period of Trump's presidency. The second argument is related to the widespread belief that the UAE and KSA need Israel for a host of reasons including its mighty army and technological advancement so as to counter Iran's influence in the region. Against this conviction, this article argues that the two countries need Israel mainly because they believe it can influence the trajectory of US foreign policy in the region. If Israel continue to lose this leverage, as it did during Obama's presidency, it also loses its attraction to the UAE and KSA. Finally, this article argues that the KSA and UAE are aware that they lose more than they gain from stronger ties to Israel, which makes them both, and the KSA in particular, very careful and cautious with regard to a potential amplification of such relations.

This article shall first explain Trump's plan and the positions of the Gulf States with regard to it. The reasons for, and constraints upon, a rapprochement between Israel and both the UAE and KSA shall then be detailed. The financial leverage the UAE and KSA have on the Palestinians should they chose to pressure the Palestinians to accept Trump's plan shall then be illustrated. The article concludes by emphasising the central importance of US regional policies on the future of relations between Israel and both the UAE and KSA.

Peace to Prosperity (the Plan)

Composed of 181 pages, the Plan aims to solve the Palestinian-Israeli conflict based on three principles: the paramount importance of Israel's security over any other considerations; the biblical right of the Jewish people to their homeland; and the notion that no one should be removed from where they currently reside. Based on these notions, the plan states that:

- Israel has the right to immediately annex (this was postponed after the Israeli elections in March 2020) the Jordan valley, all Israeli settlements in the West Bank, including the outposts (these settlements are illegal by Israel's own laws), the Jewish religious sites in the West Bank, and all of East Jerusalem within the separation wall (amounting to roughly 42 per cent of the West Bank).¹

¹ The Jordan valley and the northern area of the Dead Sea span some 160,000 hectares, encompassing almost 30 per cent of the West Bank. The size of the settlements, on the other hand, is hard to calculate, but the land designated to them makes "538,130 dunams – almost 10 per cent of the West Bank. Their regional councils of the settlements control another 1,650,370 dunams, including vast open areas that have not been attached to any particular settlement." This brings the total area under the direct control of settlements to 40 per cent of the West Bank; 63 per cent of Area C (MY. This is indeed 42 per cent of the West Bank). See "The Jordan Valley", Israeli Information Center for Human Rights in the Occupied

- While the status of the religious places in Jerusalem, the capital of Israel, will remain as they are now, including Jordan's custody over the Alharam AlSharif/Temple mount, the Jewish people – who currently pray at the Western Wall – have the right to pray at the Alharam AlSharif/Temple mount "taking into account the times of each religion's prayers and holidays."²
- The Plan envisions settling the Palestinian refugees within their hosting countries and/or within the future Palestinian state.
- Israel will have control over the borders, the space and the territories of the future Palestinian state, as well as over its water resources.
- Should the Palestinians accept these principles, in addition to recognising Israel as a Jewish state, and disarming all Palestinian military factions in Gaza, Israel will accept to negotiate the establishment of a Palestinian state on the remaining territories of the West Bank, including the foundation of a capital (which can be called AlQuds) in the towns of Abu Dis, Shufat and Kufr Aqab that exist outside the separation wall in the east and north of Jerusalem.
- The Palestinians will receive a territorial compensation in the desert of Negev to expand the Gaza territories (two isolated areas: one to be used as an economic zone, and the other for living space. Both zones are connected with Gaza through a road that passes in Israel proper). Further, a road / tunnel shall connect Gaza with the West Bank.
- Israeli settlements and outposts enclaved within the Palestinian territories will be connected through roads to Israel.
- Finally, 50 billion USD shall be spent over the next ten years in the Palestinian territories, as well as in Jordan, Lebanon and Egypt so as to implement the plan. Out of this sum, 28 billion USD is envisioned to build the Palestinian territories' infrastructure; to establish mega projects in order to create jobs for the Palestinians; and to construct a web of roads, tunnels and bridges both to ensure the continuity between the Palestinian territories, and to serve as passages for the Israeli settlements and outposts that are enclaved within the Palestinian territories.
- The plan provides a conceptual map that shows how the Palestinian territories will be linked together. It shows that a small area in the north of the West Bank called 'the Triangle' (which is home to 400 thousand Palestinians and is part of Israel since 1948) would be transferred to the Palestinian territories. The map shows Israel surrounding the entirety of the Palestinian territories; it shows Gaza without any crossing passage to Egypt; and shows two separate Palestinian enclaves in the Negev.³

The Position of the Gulf States

That only the UAE, Bahrain and Oman attended the Plan's Declaration Ceremony at the White House suggests that the KSA, Kuwait and Qatar do not support it. However, even the countries that attended the ceremony stopped short of backing it in its current form. Furthermore, in a meeting of the Arab foreign affairs ministers held at the Arab League on the 20th February 2020, the Gulf States' foreign ministers rejected the Plan considering it to be in violation of international law. They issued a statement affirming that "none of the Arab countries will deal with the Plan and/or support the US administration in any possible means to implement it." It also considered the Arab Peace Initiative the minimum requirement for peace with Israel. Finally, the statement supported both the Palestinians' position in rejecting the Plan, and their objective to have their own state on the land occupied in 1967, with East Jerusalem as its capital.⁴

Territories." Retrieved from: https://www.btselem.org/jordan_valley. See also "Settlements", Israeli Information Center for Human Rights in the Occupied Territories." Retrieved from: <https://www.btselem.org/settlements>

² See "Peace to Prosperity", The White House. Retrieved from: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/Peace-to-Prosperity-0120.pdf>, p. 43

³ "Peace to Prosperity", p. 40

⁴ Arab foreign affairs ministers attended the meeting based on a request from president Abbas of the Palestinian Authority, on February 1, 2020. See the statement of the Arab foreign affairs ministers at: https://arabi21.com/UP/1-%202020/new%20doc%202020-02-01%2015.30.19_20200201153212.pdf

The Gulf States appreciated president Trump's effort to bring about peace between the Palestinians and Israelis, but none of them endorsed the Plan forthrightly. The UAE and Bahrain saw, in the Plan, a starting point that could bring Israelis and Palestinians to the negotiating table, where the two sides could agree on the terms of peace. They did not want the Palestinians and the Arabs to reject the Plan immediately; rather, they wanted the Palestinians to engage with the Plan and develop it until such a point as it was rendered acceptable to them. Perhaps the most vocal voice that expressed this position was that of Yousef al-Otaibi, the UAE ambassador in Washington who announced that "the declared Plan represents an important starting point for the parties to return back to negotiations within an international framework led by the USA."⁵

In their individual statements at the meeting of the Arab League, the UAE and Bahrain reiterated very similar positions. Anwar Gargash, the UAE's minister for foreign affairs said, "in our assessment, the Plan does not represent a final vision to a permanent peace because peace requires the agreement of the two sides, and we affirm that any solution to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict must be based on the United Nation Security Council, the international legitimacy and the Arab Peace Initiative."⁶

Oman departed a little from the position of the UAE and Bahrain. Yousef Bin Alawi, Oman's foreign affairs minister said, rather caustically, in the meeting of Arab League, "we did not yet see president Trump's plan." He added "the [Peace to Prosperity] Plan is not good!" before reiterating Oman's traditional position in support of the Palestinians.⁷

The KSA, Kuwait and Qatar all made similar statements, albeit with slight variations. First, they all announced their full support to the Palestinian position. Second, they said any solution to the Palestinian issue must ensure the establishment of a Palestinian state on the land occupied in 1967, including East Jerusalem, and that it should be rooted in international law and the Arab Peace Initiative. Finally, they repeated their countries' commitment to continued support of the Palestinians until they achieve their goals. Where the position of those countries varies is both in mentioning the Plan, and in the tone of their speech. Farhan bin Saud, the KSA foreign minister, did not mention the Plan directly in his speech. Instead he said "at this time the KSA supports efforts to resume negotiations, it affirms that the goal of these efforts should be the establishment of a Palestinian state with East Jerusalem as its capital", further noting that it should be based on international law and the Arab peace initiative. He ended his speech by saying "we support what the Palestinians want."⁸

In brief, despite the variations in the positions of the Gulf States, none of them declared support to the Plan. All of them expressed solidarity with the Palestinians and affirmed their commitment to their longstanding position on the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, i.e. one which supports a peaceful solution based on the UNSCR and the Arab Peace Initiative. But one might argue that these public statements do not necessarily reflect the Gulf States' actual position on the Plan. Many Arab leaders have, in the past, expressed a dual narrative when it comes to the Palestinian issue: one for their own public opinion due to the sensitivity of the Palestinian issue, and one in private meetings. However, as will be shown below, the level and nature of the relations between Israel and some Gulf States does not hint to a shift in the latter's position on the Palestinian issue.

The Gulf States and Israel

It is hard to believe that the Ambassadors of the UAE, Bahrain and Oman attended the Plan's declaration ceremony without prior knowledge and approval of its content. Bahrain and the UAE, for example, were engaged heavily in organising the Peace to Prosperity workshop, held in Manamah in June 2019, and pledged

⁵ "The UAE declares its support to the deal of the century", January 29, 2010. Retrieved from: <http://bit.ly/3bnRXXC>

⁶ "The meeting of the Arab League", YouTube. Retrieved from: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WB7xXCp1P8s>

⁷ Ibid

⁸ Ibid

50 billion USD in support for the Plan.⁹ How can one then understand the support of the Plan, discreetly, and its rejection in public? To answer this question, one must trace the evolution of, and reasoning behind, the Gulf States' Israel relations. Only then can one forecast their trajectories, and analyse any implications for Palestinians.

Arguments and Evidence of Increased Ties with Israel

Despite the Oslo Agreement, the Gulf States, with the exception of Qatar, refrained from normalising their relations with Israel. In 1996, Qatar opened a trade office for Israel in Doha, but closed it four years later when it became apparent that there was no progress in the peace process with the Palestinians.¹⁰ However, following the American invasion of Iraq in 2003, Iran's influence in the region increased. Many scholars and politicians have thus argued that the new geopolitical, technological and demographic factors have created new dynamics in the Arab region, which transcend the importance of the Palestinian issue, and thereby open the way for a normalisation of relations between Israel and the Gulf States. These factors, they argued, are:

First, the Gulf States - mainly the KSA, UAE and Bahrain - are willing to sacrifice their support to the Palestinians in return for an alliance with the US and Israel in order to counter Iran's expanding influence in the Arab region, and put an end to its nuclear and ballistic missiles programmes.

Second, 'Vision 2030' of the Saudi Crown Prince, Mohammad bin Salman (MBS), especially in as it relates to the creation of the city of Neom on the Red Sea, requires peace and coordination with Israel, if the city is to have a chance of becoming a tourist attraction.

Third, the incident of the Saudi journalist, Jamal Khashoggi, has made the Saudi leadership less able to resist pressure from the US in order to normalise relations with Israel.

Fourth, the Gulf States need Israeli technology for the surveillance of their own citizens, and also to purchase precision missiles that the US and other Western countries are not willing to sell.

Finally, the younger generation, who account for over 60 per cent of the population in the Gulf States, cares less about the Palestinian issue than older generations have done, making it easier for the Gulf States new leaders to normalise relations with Israel.

These arguments are not baseless. All the Gulf States, excepting Kuwait, have shown a certain degree of willingness to move from a complete boycott of Israel to some degree of openness. For example, in an interview with *The Atlantic*, the Crown Prince MBS said "the Palestinians and the Israelis have the right to have their own land."¹¹ Although MBS did not depart from the traditional position of the KSA, as expressed in the Arab Peace Initiative, the tone of the statement was interpreted as being more reconciliatory with Israel than previous positions have been. MBS also met twice with delegations of the American evangelical Christians that support Israel.¹² In March 2018, the KSA allowed India airline to use its airspace for a flightpath to Israel.¹³ Trade-wise, the *New York Times* has reported that the KSA is using software bought from an Israeli company to monitor

⁹ Grace Wermenbol, "Why is Bahrain hosting the mideast peace conference?", *The Atlantic*, May 30, 2019. Retrieved from: <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/why-is-bahrain-hosting-the-mideast-peace-conference/>

¹⁰ Matthew Machowski, "Qatar-Israel Relations: A Historical Overview", Matthewmachowski website, May 9, 2011. Retrieved from: <https://matthewmachowski.com/2011/05/qatar-israel-relations-a-historical-overview/>

¹¹ "Saudi crown prince says Israelis have right to their own land", Reuters, April 2, 2018. Retrieved from: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-saudi-prince-israel/saudi-crown-prince-says-israelis-have-right-to-their-own-land-idUSKCN1H91SQ>

¹² Aya Batrawy, "US Christian evangelical delegation meets Saudi crown prince", *Associate Press*, September 11, 2019. Retrieved from: <https://apnews.com/e7f10269e60b46dabe31c455fa04017e>

¹³ "Details of first trip to Israel over the space of Saudi Arabia", *Alaraby Aljadid*, March 22, 2018. Retrieved from: <http://bit.ly/31PHgch>

Saudi defectors abroad. But the report also mentioned that the software was bought from a Danish company, and not directly from Israel.¹⁴ On the individual level, while in the past it was a taboo for Saudis to contact Israelis, or to advocate for normalising relations with Israel, today this is not viewed as a crime. Anwar Ishqi, a retired Saudi general, for example, attended conferences with Israelis including in Israel itself.¹⁵ Another illustrative case is that of Mohammad Saud, a Saudi journalist who speaks fluent Hebrew and who had a video call with Netanyahu during the last Israeli election during which he expressed support for the Israeli PM's reelection.¹⁶

Israel's relations with the UAE are far more advanced than they are with the KSA. The former involves direct meetings and coordination between officials, in addition to arms and technology purchases. In 2012, Netanyahu met secretly in New York with Sheikh Abdullah bin Zayed Al Nahyan, the UAE foreign affairs minister, to coordinate efforts to counter Iran's nuclear programme. According to the Israeli Haaretz newspaper, Sheikh Abdullah made it clear during the meeting that the official normalisation of relations with Israel hinges on progress made in the peace process with the Palestinians.¹⁷ Since then, many Israeli officials have visited the UAE to attend international conferences, including ministers of communications, culture,¹⁸ infrastructure¹⁹ and foreign affairs.²⁰ In 2019, officials from the UAE, Israel and the US held three secret meetings to coordinate efforts against Iran. According to the New York Times, two of these meetings were held before September,²¹ while the latest was held in the White House, on December 17th, and involved the UAE ambassador to Washington; Netanyahu's national security advisor, Meir Ban-Shabbat; and the US national security advisor, Robert O'Brien.²² The recent meeting in Uganda, between Abdel-Fattah Burhan, head of Sudan's transitional government and Netanyahu was arranged, according to Haaretz, by the UAE.²³ In terms of trade, unconfirmed reports reveal that the UAE bought drones from the Israeli company 'Aeronautics and Albeit',²⁴ and made a contract with another Israeli security company, AGT, to protect its oil and gas facilities.²⁵ Although there are no reports about meetings between individuals, Khalaf Alhabtur, a UAE businessman, is ardent in his call for normalising the relations between Israel and the Gulf States.²⁶

¹⁴ David D. Kirkpatrick, "Israeli Software Helped Saudis Spy on Khashoggi, Lawsuit says", New York Times, December 2, 2018. Retrieved from: <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/12/02/world/middleeast/saudi-khashoggi-spyware-israel.html>

¹⁵ "A precedent of our time: A Saudi retired general visits Israel", Alhura TV, July 24, 2016. Retrieved from: <https://www.alhurra.com/a/saudi-retired-general-visits-israel/316225.html>

¹⁶ "Facetime Call Mohammad Saud and Netanyahu", YouTube, December 27, 2019. Retrieved from: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U5KtlzceEqo>

¹⁷ Brak Ravid, "Exclusive: Netanyahu secretly met with UAE foreign minister in 2012 in New York", Haaretz, July 25, 2017. Retrieved from: <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/netanyahu-secretly-met-with-uae-foreign-minister-in-2012-in-new-york-1.5432342>

¹⁸ "Another Israeli minister visits UAE, calling for 'peace and stability'", Middle East Monitor, October 30, 2018. Retrieved from: <https://www.middleeasteye.net/fr/news/another-israeli-minister-visits-dubai-calling-peace-and-stability-661971661>

¹⁹ Niv Elis, "Dubai-based company offering services in Israel", Jerusalem Post, August 13, 2015. Retrieved from: <https://www.jpost.com/Business-and-Innovation/Dubai-based-company-offering-services-in-Israel-412073>

²⁰ "Israel foreign minister visits Abu Dhabi", Middle East Monitor, July 1, 2019. Retrieved from: <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20190701-israel-foreign-minister-visits-abu-dhabi/>

²¹ Lara Jakes and Edward Wong, "The U.S. Has joined secret talks with Israel and the U.A.E. The topic? Iran", New York Times, August 15, 2019. Retrieved from: <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/08/15/us/politics/us-iran-uae-israel.html>

²² Dave Lawler and Barak Ravid, "Scoop: Israel and UAE discuss anti-Iran cooperation at secret White House meeting", AXIOS, February 4, 2020. Retrieved from: <https://www.axios.com/israel-uae-white-house-meeting-iran-trump-kushner-ec81aa24-02db-4920-b4f2-88eec301222c.html>

²³ "Netanyahu Meeting With Sudan's Leader Was Set Up by UAE, Sudanese Official Says", Haaretz, February 4, 2020. Retrieved from: <https://www.haaretz.com/middle-east-news/netanyahu-meeting-with-sudan-s-leader-was-set-up-by-uae-sudanese-official-says-1.8495262>

²⁴ "UAE buying arms from Israel", Middle East Monitor, February 5, 2018. Retrieved from: <https://www.scribd.com/article/370839932/Uae-Buying-Arms-From-Israel>

²⁵ "Israel and UAE are normalising relations", Middle East Monitor, September 8, 2017. Retrieved from: <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20170908-israel-and-uae-are-normalising-relations/>

²⁶ "A UAE businessman calls for public normalization with Israel", Alkhalij online, November 27, 2019. Retrieved from: <http://bit.ly/2SzQbDx>

Similarly, there are relations between Israel and the Gulf States of Oman, Bahrain and Qatar. Israel's Prime minister Netanyahu paid the deceased Sultan Qaboos of Oman a visit in October 2018.²⁷ Bahrain's foreign affairs minister defended Israel repetitive attacks on Iran's bases in Syria.²⁸ Meanwhile, Qatar coordinates every month with Israel to channel money to Hamas's authority in Gaza.²⁹

The evidence, therefore, clearly points to some level of coordination between Israel and the UAE, but there is little concrete evidence of close cooperation between Israel and the KSA. However, a close scrutiny to the real reasons behind the rapprochement between the two sides point to constraints that prevent the development of these relations from becoming overt and normal.

The Constraints on Relations between KSA/UAE and Israel

The development of the Gulf States-Israel relations is a recent phenomenon. They began after the 2011 Arab Spring, at which point Iran's persistent threat of revolution, which harkens back to its Islamic Revolution of 1979, was felt anew in both the Gulf States and Israel. The Gulf states' resistance to Iran's revolutionary exploits has been long-standing. For instance, they supported Iraq in the First Gulf War (1980-1988) mainly in order to stop Iran from exporting its revolution to neighbouring countries. At this time, Iran considered Israel to be its main enemy and channelled money, weapons and expertise to the Lebanese Hezbollah party since the early eighties, and later on to the Palestinian Hamas, and the Islamic Jihad movements. However, despite both Gulf States and Israel having a long history of antagonism with Iran, it was not until 2011, that Iran's threat to both sides had the effect of bettering the relations between them. Even in 2002, when it was revealed that Iran might possess a secret nuclear programme,³⁰ which increased the Gulf States' feeling of insecurity, they maintained their boycott to Israel. Three main reasons explain the Gulf States' position in the period prior to 2011:

First, up and until former US President Obama's election in 2008, there was an American military build-up in the Gulf States that led to the establishment of eighteen military bases in the six Gulf States.³¹ Some estimates put the number of American troops in these bases slightly above thirty thousand.³² Coupled with the economic sanctions imposed on Iran after the revelation of its nuclear programme in 2002, the military bases created a sense of security in the Gulf States, meaning they had little need to make overtures to Israel.

Second, although several Israeli prime ministers threatened time and time again to strike Iran's nuclear facilities, neither did they receive an American green light, nor did senior military and security officials in Israel approve such a strike.³³ Aware of these constraints, the Gulf States did not believe that Israel could qualitatively add much to their security, a conviction that was solidified after the Israeli failure to impose its will on Hezbollah during the 2006 Lebanon War.

Finally, a host of geopolitical, national and cultural reasons prevented the Gulf States from having relations with Israel. Unlike the Palestinian territories, Jordan, and Egypt – the Gulf States do not share any borders with

²⁷ Isabell Keshner, "Israeli Prime Minister Visits Oman, Offering a Possible Back Channel to Iran", New York Times, October 26, 2019. Retrieved from: <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/26/world/middleeast/israel-oman-netanyahu-visit.html>

²⁸ "Bahrain says Israel 'right to defend itself' after Syria strikes", The New Arab, May 10, 2018. Retrieved from: <https://www.alaraby.co.uk/english/news/2018/5/10/bahrain-israel-right-to-defend-itself-following-syria-strikes>

²⁹ Nidal Almugharbi, "Qatar pays Gaza salaries to ease tensions; Israel says money's not for Hamas", Reuters, November 9, 2018. Retrieved from: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-israel-palestinians-gaza/qatar-pays-gaza-salaries-to-ease-tensions-israel-says-moneys-not-for-hamas-idUSKCN1NE1ET>

³⁰ "Iran", Nuclear Threat Initiative, January 2020. Retrieved from: <https://www.nti.org/learn/countries/iran/nuclear/>

³¹ "Fact Sheet – US Military Bases and Facilities in the Middle East", American Security Project, June 18, 2018. Retrieved from: <https://www.americansecurityproject.org/fact-sheet-us-military-bases-and-facilities-in-the-middle-east/>

³² "Factbox: U.S. forces in Gulf region and Iraq", Reuters, January 8, 2020. Retrieved from: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-iraq-security-usa-presence-factbox/factbox-u-s-forces-in-gulf-region-and-iraq-idUSKBN1Z72GF>

³³ Ronen Bergma and Mark Mazetti, "The secret history of the push to strike Iran", New York Times, September 4, 2019. Retrieved from: <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/09/04/magazine/iran-strike-israel-america.html>

Israel. They do not feel any urgency to sign peace treaties with Israel and normalise relations with it. Further, besides the distribution of rent to their people, leaders of the Gulf States draw their legitimacy from longstanding traditions that are rooted in the Arabic and Islamic brotherhood and culture. As such, abandoning the Palestinians for the sake of having normal relations with Israel, would harm their own legitimacy. In fact, it was King Abdullah of KSA who proposed the 2002 Arab Peace Initiative, which set minimum conditions on Israel before the Arab states would be willing to normalise their relations with it. These conditions include the withdrawal of Israel from all the land it occupied in 1967 war, the establishment of a Palestinian state on the land occupied since 1967 with East Jerusalem as its capital, and the achievement of a just solution to the Palestinian refugee problem, one to be agreed upon with Israel but in accordance with U.N. General Assembly Resolution 194.³⁴ As the birthplace of Islam, it required courage from the KSA leadership to propose such an initiative that implied having embassies for Israel in Riyadh and other Gulf State capitals.

These constraints, which have prevented the Gulf States from normalising relations with Israel, did not change. The shift came from elsewhere.

Obama's Policies and the Gulf States' Need for Israel

What changed and provoked some Gulf States to develop their relations with Israel was the shift in US Middle East policy during Obama's two terms. First, some Gulf States, mainly the UAE and later on the KSA, came to believe that during the 2011 Arab uprisings, the Obama administration did not mind replacing traditional US regional allies with new regimes, even if they espoused the Muslim Brotherhood's ideology. The Crown Prince, and de facto ruler of the UAE, Mohammad bin Zayed (MBZ), is quoted to have warned Obama "repeatedly in phone conversations about the dangers [of the Muslim Brotherhood]."³⁵ In other words, in the past, the Gulf States spent enormous resources to prevent the spread of the Islamic revolution of Iran into their countries with the blessing and support of the US; yet, in 2011, they had to counter the spread of the Sunni Muslim revolutions alone, which they consider an even more dangerous threat to their states than that of Shia Iran.³⁶

Second, the rulers of the Gulf States discovered that the Obama administration was conducting secret negotiations with Iran over its nuclear programme without informing them, and this at their backdoor, in Oman. They felt betrayed, and insulted, to the extent that Crown Prince MBZ was heard "trash-talking the [Obama] administration to visitors."³⁷

Finally, the Gulf States believed that the US was planning a military withdrawal from the region, especially since it had become less reliant on the Gulf States' oil. Furthermore, they were convinced that the US was planning a new security arrangement for the Gulf region which would include Iran. These policy shifts were apparent when President Obama declared, in his 2016 State of the Union speech, that "the Middle East is going through a transformation that will play out for a generation, rooted in conflicts that date back millennia." He added that the US should learn from the lessons of Vietnam and Iraq and avoid "spilling American blood and treasure that ultimately weakens us."³⁸ In an interview with *The Atlantic* the same year, Obama explained his approach to Iran and the Gulf States. He announced that "the competition between the Saudis and the Iranians – which has helped to feed proxy wars and chaos in Syria and Iraq and Yemen – requires us to say to our friends as well as

³⁴ "Arab peace initiative: full text", *The Guardian*, March 28, 2002. Retrieved from:

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2002/mar/28/israel7>

³⁵ Robert F. Worth, "Mohammed bin Zayed's Dark Vision of the Middle East's Future", *New York Times*, January 9, 2020.

Retrieved from: <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/01/09/magazine/united-arab-emirates-mohammed-bin-zayed.html?action=click&module=Top%20Stories&pgtype=Homepage>

³⁶ May Darwich, "The Ontological (In)security of Similarity: Wahhabism versus Islamism in Saudi Foreign Policy", GIGA Working Paper, No. 263, December 2014. Retrieved from: <https://www.giga-hamburg.de/en/publication/the-ontological-insecurity-of-similarity-wahhabism-versus-islamism-in-saudi-foreign>

³⁷ Worth, "Mohammed bin Zayed's Dark Vision"

³⁸ Times Staff, "Read the Full Transcript of Obama's Final State of the Union", *The Times*, January 13, 2019. Retrieved from: <https://time.com/4178279/state-union-transcript-2016/>

to the Iranians that they need to find an effective way to share the neighbourhood and institute some sort of cold peace." He further stated, "our traditional friends, do not have the ability to put out the flames on their own..." Without such a 'cold peace', he declared, "we have to start coming in and using our military power to settle scores. And that would be in the interest neither of the United States nor of the Middle East." What perhaps infuriated the Gulf States most of all was the accusation of their being free riders, when Obama stated, "what has been a habit over the last several decades in these circumstances [referring to the US intervention in Libya] is people pushing us to act but then showing an unwillingness to put any skin in the game".³⁹ That added a personal level of disrespect on the part of the leaders of the Gulf States to Obama. The then KSA ambassador, Adel Aljubeir, said "Iran is the new great power of the Middle East, and the US is the old."⁴⁰

Meanwhile, the Israeli government in turn, was often at loggerheads with the Obama administration concerning Iran and the Palestinian-Israeli conflict.

As such, it was in a context of joint hostility to the new directions of US Middle East policy that the Gulf States and Israel moved towards more coordination with one another. By opening the door to Israel, the UAE and KSA hoped to join forces and thereby prevent the changes of US Middle East policy. In order to benefit from Israel's influence in Washington, there was a price the UAE and KSA had to pay. Because a full normalisation of relations between the two countries and Israel was, and remains, too costly for them, buying Israeli arms, technology and allowing Israeli officials to attend international conferences was considered an acceptable and affordable price to pay.

In short, it was not the Gulf States' need for Israel's mighty army to confront Iran and its proxies, nor the need for Israeli technology and precision missiles – which can easily be bought elsewhere – that instigated the coordination with Israel. It was, instead, the Gulf States' need of Israel to influence Washington to remain in line with its old policies in the Middle East that Obama had begun to change.

Trump's Policies and their Costs for the Gulf States

With the election of President Trump, the UAE, KSA, and Israel were relieved. Trump scrapped the nuclear deal with Iran, imposed maximum economic sanctions on the country, and declared support to the traditional Arab regimes. But the price the Trump administration placed upon overturning Obama's policies in the Middle East seemed very costly for the Gulf States, so much so that they might not be willing to pay. In return for ending Iran's nuclear deal, the Trump administration requested lucrative contracts with the Gulf States worth hundreds of billions of dollars; carte blanche in terms of support for Trump's plan to solve the Palestinian-Israeli conflict; the signature of a non-aggression treaty with Israel, and an overt alliance with Israel. There are five reasons that might prevent the Gulf States from accepting this costly price:

First, it is election year in the US. Unless President Trump is reelected, there is no urgency for the UAE and KSA to normalise their relations with Israel. A new administration from the Democratic Party at the White House might create new political dynamics rendering Israel less important for the two Gulf countries.

Second, the Trump administration has proven unable to deal with Iran's provocations in the Gulf region, as seen after Iran or its proxies' attack in September 2019 on the state-owned Saudi Aramco oil processing facilities at Abqaiq and Khurais in eastern Saudi Arabia. This failure of strength renders the Gulf States less likely to do US bidding.

³⁹ Jeffrey Goldberg, "The Obama Doctrine: The U.S. president talks through his hardest decisions about America's role in the world", *The Atlantic*, April 2016. Retrieved from: <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2016/04/the-obama-doctrine/471525/>

⁴⁰ Ibid

Third, while the Trump administration has different policies towards Iran than those of the Obama administration, it does seem committed to minimise its presence in the Middle East. In fact, President Trump promised, during the elections, to withdraw US forces from the Middle East. In his latest State of the Union address he detailed the achievements of his administration in this regard, declaring further that the US will not “function to serve other nations as law enforcement agencies”⁴¹, a hint that he is not willing to remain in Syria, Iraq or engage in confrontation with Iran for the sake of the Gulf States.

Fourth, betting on the idea that the younger generation in KSA is less rooted in the history of its own country, or in the beliefs of their fathers, is an untested and unrealistic hypothesis. In fact, the Palestinian issue proved to be very sticky. For example, Israel has relations with Egypt since 1978, but the Egyptians' support to the Palestinian issue is still overwhelming.

Finally, establishing overt relations with Israel would harm the very reason why the KSA and UAE sought the help of Israel in the first place, i.e., to weaken Iran. The normalisation of relations with Israel would invariably push more Arabs from the Sunni Muslims, to support Iran's policies in the region, thereby actually strengthening Iran and creating tensions within the Gulf States themselves.

In order to mitigate some of these risks, the Palestinians would have to accept to end the conflict with Israel in order to make it easier for the KSA and UAE to normalise their relations with Israel. This is where the UAE and KSA's financial support to the Palestinians could play a role, should they decide to go in this direction.

The Gulf States Leverage over the Palestinians

Up until the Oslo Agreements between Israel and the Palestinian Liberation Organisation (PLO) in 1993, none of the Gulf States had any relationship with Israel. The Gulf States were ardent supporters of the Palestinians. They imposed an oil embargo on the Western countries that supported Israel in the 1973 War and lifted it only when Egypt asked them to do so. They stood behind the PLO on every decision it took to rally support internationally, and they funded the PLO and later on the Palestinian Authority. As table I shows, the Gulf States provided the Palestinian Authority with one-third of all the funds it received from 1996 to (and including) 2019, with the KSA and UAE channelling almost 80 per cent.⁴²

⁴¹ “Full Transcript: Trump's 2020 State of the Union Address”, New York Times, February 5, 2020. Retrieved from: <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/05/us/politics/state-of-union-transcript.html>

⁴² “Foreign Aid Management in Palestine”, Palestinian Economic Portal. Retrieved from: <https://www.palestineconomy.ps/donors/en>

Table I: Donations to the Palestinian Authority (1996 to 2019) in millions of USD

Gulf States	1996-1998	1999-2001	2002-2004	2005-2007	2008-2010	2011-2013	2014-2016	2017-2019	Total
Saudi Arabia	73	507	464	533	619	547	718	344	3805
United Arab Emirates	10	332	351	244	496	288	266	109	2096
Qatar	0	90	10	0	10	246	351	50	757
Kuwait	0	0	155	38	137	172	201	53	756
Oman	0	10	0	10	3	15	36	0	74
Bahrain	0	6	0	0	2	0	5		13
Total Gulf States	83	945	980	825	1267	1268	1577	556	7501
Other countries	1996-1998	1999-2001	2002-2004	2005-2007	2008-2010	2011-2013	2014-2016	2017-2019	Total
Germany	115	93	125	225	315	401	359	152	1785
USA	193	266	471	452	1566	1328	1029	301	5606
EU and its institutions	340	282	590	850	1813	1033	1157	456	6521
Japan	56	106	56	110	195	190	182	54	949
Canada	10	1	40	93	151	181	122	27	625
Total other countries	714	748	1282	1730	4040	3133	2849	990	15486
Total Gulf States and other countries									22987

Source: the author constructed the table based on information from the Palestinian Economic Portal.

The table shows that the Palestinian Authority (PA) received three times more funds from the Gulf States in the period 2014-2016 (1577 million USD) than in the period 2017-2019 (only 556 million USD). However, one should be cautious to conclude that the reduction of the Gulf States' financial support to the Palestinians was done in tandem with, and because of, the US pressure exerted on the Palestinians to accept the Trump Peace Plan. This reduction of financial support was also part of a wider trend across all donors to the PA, including countries opposed to the 'Peace to Prosperity' Plan. Another, perhaps more important reason, is that the KSA and UAE had to channel more funds to the war in Yemen.

Regardless of this temporal reduction in aid, however, the numbers show the degree of leverage the KSA and UAE have on the Palestinians. Should they decide to exert pressure on the Palestinians to accept the Plan, they could simply reduce their funding to zero. This is, however, an unlikely outcome. For, despite potential pressures, it is hard to imagine a legitimate Palestinian leadership that would accept the Plan as it stands. Past experience has shown that the Palestinians have refused better offers than this one, all of which fell short of the Arab Peace Initiative. Knowing this, it is unlikely that the KSA at least will impose pressures on the Palestinians.

Conclusions

The evidence shows increased ties between the UAE and Israel, less so between Israel and the KSA. However, the starting point to understand the reasons for the evolution of Israel-KSA/UAE relations, is not related to Israel's formidable army and technology, but to the Gulf States' need to maintain US Middle East policy in the direction it was prior to Obama's era. Having Israel on their side to influence Washington to remain in line with its old policies proved to be successful with the advent of Trump's administration, who reversed most of Obama's policies in the region. Nonetheless, this approach is costly for the Gulf States. To maintain Trump's current policies in the region, the UAE and KSA are under pressure to exert pressure themselves on the Palestinians to accept Trump's plan, and to fully normalise their relations with Israel. In order for the two states to consider doing so, Trump must first win a second term. A new US president from the Democratic Party might revive Obama's policies towards Iran and the Palestinians and would therefore once again make Israel less important to Gulf States.

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