

The Gulf States and the Israeli Annexation Plan

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Introduction

Relations between Israel and the Gulf States rose to the centre stage when Israeli prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, declared his intention to annex the Jordan Valley and the settlements in the West Bank by early July this year. On the one hand, several Gulf States officials warned that such a move on the part of Israel would lead to a halt in the process of normalizing the relations between their states and Israel. On the other hand, many close friends to Israel including 189 democrats in the US House of Representatives have warned that the annexation “would likely jeopardize Israel’s significant progress on normalization with Arab states at a time when closer cooperation can contribute to countering shared threats.”¹

President Trump’s Peace for Prosperity Plan, declared in last January, has envisioned a solution to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict based in part on Israel’s right to exercise sovereignty over the Jordan Valley and Israeli settlements in the West Bank, a territory that amounts to 30% of the Palestinian occupied territories without East Jerusalem.² Encouraged by this vision, Netanyahu has perceived an opportunity to annex large swath of the West Bank with the U.S. administration consent. Furthermore, he used the annexation plan to consolidate support for him during the last Israeli elections. In an effort to sway the voters a day before Israeli elections on March 2, 2020, he declared in an interview with Israel public radio that “annexation of the Jordan Valley and other parts of the West Bank was his top priority”, adding that this “will happen within weeks, two months at the most.”³ On May 25th, Netanyahu told members of his conservative Likud party that “the ‘historic opportunity’ - the U.S. greenlight to annex parts of the West Bank- had never before occurred since Israel’s founding in 1948” pledging to seize the opportunity and extend Israel sovereignty on the Jordan valley and the settlements in early July.⁴

Whether Israel will do the annexation in early July as Netanyahu vowed repeatedly remains to be seen. In a meeting with 11 mayors of the settlements in the West Bank on June 8th, Netanyahu promised to apply Israel sovereignty over all the settlements in three weeks, but he refrained from mentioning the Jordan Valley. His remarks might mean that the government of Israel would initially annex about 3% of West Bank, covering the 132 settlements and home to some 450,000 settlers, while the Jordan Valley could be annexed at a later stage.⁵ Furthermore, the Trump’s administration has linked its green light for annexation to a consensus within the Israeli government.

The Israeli government is comprised of a coalition between the Likud and the White and Blue parties, with other small right-wing parties. Benny Gantz, the leader of the White and Blue party and the alternate prime minister in late 2021, is in favour of the annexation of some of the big settlements inside the West Bank such

¹ Lahav Harkov, Omri Nahmias, and Tovah Lazaroff, “No American decision on annexation as Friedman returns to Israel”, The Jerusalem Post, 25 June 2020. Retrieved from: <https://www.jpost.com/breaking-news/us-ambassador-to-israel-david-friedman-returning-to-israel-632811>

² “Peace to Prosperity: A Vision to Improve the Life of Palestinian and Israel People”, The White House, n.d. Retrieved from: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/Peace-to-Prosperity-0120.pdf>, p.12-13

³ “Netanyahu pledges ‘immediate’ annexation steps if re-elected”, Agency France-Press, 1 March 2020. Retrieved from: <http://www.rfi.fr/en/wires/20200301-netanyahu-pledges-immediate-annexation-steps-if-re-elected>

⁴ Efrat Forsher and Ariel Kahana, “‘Historic opportunity cannot be missed,’ Netanyahu tells settlers”, Israel Hayom, 2 June 2020. Retrieved from: <https://www.israelhayom.com/2020/06/02/historic-opportunity-cannot-be-missed-netanyahu-tells-settlers/>

⁵ Jacob Magid, “Netanyahu vows all settlements will be annexed July 1, but other lands may wait”, The Times of Israel, 8 June 2020. Retrieved from: <https://www.timesofisrael.com/netanyahu-vows-all-settlements-will-be-annexed-july-1-but-other-lands-may-wait/>

as Ma'aleh Adumim and the other major settlement blocs. He fears the annexation of the Jordan Valley and the entire settlements might lead to a conflict with Jordan.⁶

From the Gulf States' perspective, one that is shared by the Palestinian Authority, the Arab countries, and parts of the international community, the annexation of the settlements and the Jordan Valley will make it impossible to solve the Palestinian-Israeli conflict on the basis of a two-state solution. However, given that the U.S. administration has not yet given a green light for the annexation of the Jordan Valley and the entire settlements, the rift within the Israeli government over the size of the annexation, and the regional and international reactions, Israel will most likely move first to apply its civil law on the settlements of the West Bank or parts of them to avoid the regional and international ramifications that might result from a greater annexation.

In this article, we outline the Gulf States reaction to Israel's annexation plan. We argue that the Gulf States' message is clear: the annexation plan will roll back, at least, the visible aspects of normalization with Israel. However, the extent of their reaction will depend on the scope of annexation. We also make it clear that the position of the Gulf States in regards to a normalization with Israel is not unified.

The focus of the article will be on the positions of the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA). The other Gulf States such as Bahrain and Oman concur with the UAE, while Kuwait and Qatar are closer in their position to the KSA on the issue of normalization.⁷ We begin by outlining the evolution of Israel-Gulf States relations.

The Relations between the Gulf States and Israel

Today there are both, the Gulf States that have a tough and hostile attitude towards Israel, and countries that are taking steps to normalize their relations with Israel. Historically, the first secret contacts between Israel and Oman date back to 1970. In the 1990s, during the peace negotiations between Israelis and Palestinians, Israeli representatives opened offices in Oman and Qatar. Many of these relations ended during the second intifada or shifted back into secrecy.⁸ Starting with Iran's "engagement" in Lebanon in 2006 and Syria from 2011, there was an increasing overlap in the foreign and security-related threat analyses of the Gulf States and Israel. The focus today is on Iran as a (common) threat. Both the Gulf States and Israel rejected the Nuclear Treaty (JCPOA) and then-President Barack Obama's policy toward Iran. Some statements and increased contacts between Israel and the Gulf States illustrate how the relationship has changed, especially in the past three years:

- › The Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman recognized Israel's right to exist during a 2018 trip to the USA: "I believe the Palestinians and the Israelis have the right to have their own land."⁹
- › In October 2018, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu travelled to Oman for talks with the then Sultan Qaboos - an Israeli Prime Minister's first public trip to an Arab Gulf state.¹⁰
- › In 2019, Israeli Foreign Minister Yisrael Katz travelled to Abu Dhabi, visited the UN climate conference and discussed with Emirates on issues such as common relationships in technology, agriculture, regional security issues and Iran. Other Israeli ministers followed by visiting the Emirates or Qatar.¹¹

⁶ "Blue and White lawmakers said to support staged annexation", Al-Monitor, 17 June 2020. Retrieved from:

<https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2020/06/israel-palestinians-benny-gantz-annexation-west-bank.html>

⁷ For more analysis on this issue, see Mohammad Yaghi, "The Gulf States Relations with Israel and Trump's Plan for Peace", Regional Program of Gulf States at Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, Policy Paper 6, April 2020. Retrieved from:

<https://www.kas.de/documents/286298/8668222/Policy+Report+No+6+Gulf+States+and+Israel+Relations.pdf/b983ea39-7839-ce27-2f3b-922d6be34281?version=1.0&t=1587851552612>

⁸ International Institute for Strategic Studies, "Israel and the Gulf states", Strategic Comments, 1 August 2019. Retrieved from: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/13567888.2019.1651098>

⁹ Jeffrey Goldberg, "Saudi Crown Prince: Iran's Supreme Leader 'Makes Hitler Look Good'", The Atlantic, 2 April 2018.

Retrieved from: <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2018/04/mohammed-bin-salman-iran-israel/557036/>

¹⁰ "Israel's prime minister visits Oman, an Arab monarchy - and is welcomed", The Economist, 3 November 2018.

Retrieved from: <https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2018/11/03/israels-prime-minister-visits-oman-an-arab-monarchy-and-is-welcomed>

¹¹ "Israel foreign minister visits Abu Dhabi", Middle East Monitor, 1 July 2019. Retrieved from:

<https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20190701-israel-foreign-minister-visits-abu-dhabi/>

- › The participation of an Israeli judoka in a judo tournament in Abu Dhabi in 2018, which he won, also caused a sensation; the national anthem of Israel was played at the award ceremony and the Israeli flag was hoisted up.¹²
- › Bahrain has a particularly open approach to Israel: for example, King Al Khalifa called on the Arab League to end boycotting Israel, Bahraini citizens can travel to Israel, and Bahrain has said that Israel had the right to defend itself if targeted by Iran.¹³
- › Israeli Athletes can take part in competitions in Qatar; there are also economic connections between Israel and Qatar.¹⁴

Still, the relations between the Gulf states and Israel are sensitive. No Gulf state has taken formal steps to normalize relations with Israel. The KSA has declared repeatedly that normalization with Israel will only take place after solving the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. Kuwait declared that it is going to be the last country in the Arab world that makes relations with Israel and Qatar is using its relations with Israel both as a channel of communication between Hamas and Israel, and as a means to fund infrastructure projects in Gaza. The public opinion in the Gulf States is critical of a rapprochement with Israel – and the rulers of the Gulf States have to take this issue into consideration when they weigh on their relations with Israel. President Trump's Peace for Prosperity Plan as well as the possible Annexation makes it harder for those in the Gulf states who favour a policy of rapprochement with Israel.

The Gulf States Reaction to Annexation

The reaction of the Gulf States to Israel annexation plan is better grasped from the direct appeals officials of UAE and KSA have made to the Israel public opinion recently. Yousef al-Otaiba, the UAE ambassador to the United States; Anwar Gargash, the United Arab Emirates Minister of State for Foreign Affairs; and Nawaf Obaid, an academic and former advisor to the Saudi government presented the position of their respective countries directly to the Israelis. Their messages were sharp: the annexation is a game changer. It will set back the normalization process with Israel. However, there are differences between the positions of the KSA and that of the UAE. Because the former does not have relations with Israel, it can only threaten to influence those Arab countries that have relations with Israel to freeze them.

The UAE relations with Israel are more advanced than of any other Gulf States country. Recently a plane of the UAE's Etihad airline carrying medical assistance to the Palestinians landed in Ben Gurion airport.¹⁵ The UAE position from the annexation was directly communicated to the Israelis through Yousef al-Otaiba, the UAE ambassador in the U.S. On June 12th, al-Otaiba published an article in the Hebrew language at the Israeli Yedioth Ahronoth newspaper in which he warned the Israelis that the "annexation will certainly and immediately upend Israeli aspirations for improved security, economic and cultural ties with the Arab world and with UAE." The annexation he said, "will ignite violence and rouse extremists" and "will send shock waves around the region, especially in Jordan whose stability benefits the entire region, particularly Israel." He reminded the Israelis of the growing relations between their country and the UAE including the invitation to Israel to participate in Dubai's World Expo, which is planned for next year; and the presence of Israeli diplomats in Abu Dhabi at the headquarters of the United Nations International Renewable Energy Agency. He also talked about the future possible cooperation between the two countries on issues of common concerns such as combating terrorism, business, tourism, climate change, water and food security, technology and advanced science and

¹² Itamar Katzir, „Israel's Anthem Plays in Abu Dhabi for First Time as Judoka Wins Gold“, Haaretz, 28 October 2018. Retrieved from: <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/israel-s-anthem-plays-in-abu-dhabi-for-first-time-as-judoka-wins-gold-1.6600967>

¹³ „Bahrain FM: Israel has a right to defend itself“, Middle East Monitor, 11 May 2018. Retrieved from: <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20180511-bahrain-fm-israel-has-a-right-to-defend-itself/>

¹⁴ Ulrich Schmid, „Israels neue Freunde“, Neue Zürcher Zeitung, 25 January 2019. Retrieved from: <https://www.nzz.ch/international/israel-muslimische-staaten-wenden-sich-ehemaligem-erzfeind-zu-id.1451903?reduced=true>

¹⁵ „Abu Dhabi's Etihad Sends Second Flight of Palestinian Coronavirus Aid Lands in Israel“, Haaretz, 9 June 2020. Retrieved from: <https://www.haaretz.com/middle-east-news/palestinians/abu-dhabi-s-etihad-sends-second-flight-of-palestinian-coronavirus-aid-to-israel-1.8907968>

the opportunities this might bring to the two countries and the entire region. These measures, al-Otaiba declared are “what normal could be”, while “annexation is not normal.” It is “a misguided provocation of another order.”¹⁶

In an interview with al-Otaiba by “The National”, an Emirati newspaper, he explained why he wrote his OP-ED in an Israeli newspaper instead of an Arab or Western newspaper. He said that he wanted to let the Israelis directly know that “all the progress that [they] have seen and the attitudes that have been changing towards Israel – people becoming more accepting of Israel and less hostile – all of that could be undermined by a decision to annex the West Bank.”¹⁷

However, the UAE message seems to be ambiguous and related to the size of annexation. Just a few days from the declaration of the annexation, Israel and the UAE announced an agreement between two private Emirati companies and two Israeli companies to develop technology to fight the coronavirus.¹⁸ The announcement came amidst news that Israel will only annex one or two settlements in early July.¹⁹ This agreement could be a reward from the UAE to Israel for not closing the door of the two-state solution should it opt for the annexation of a large swath of the West Bank. Jordan, the UAE and Bahrain have coordinated closely on the issue of annexation and they announced their rejection of to it.²⁰

The position of keeping the door half opened between the UAE and Israel is reflected in a recent interview with Anwar Ghargash, the UAE minister for Foreign Affairs, who made it clear that while his country was against the annexation, it wanted to separate the political from other areas where the two countries could still cooperate. In a videoconference-interview with the American Jewish Committee in the U.S. on June 17th, Ghargash put the issue of relations with Israel in a form of a question: “can I have a political disagreement with Israel but at the same time try and bridge other areas in the region [of mutual concern]?”. Ghargash answered his own question, “yes I can.” He explained further that the “full break of the relations between the Arabs and Israelis increases only the animosity between them”, and that “communications have a better chance to bridge the gap between the two sides.”²¹

The official position of the KSA differs from that of the UAE in substance and tone. In the meeting of the ministers of foreign affairs of the Islamic countries to discuss the issue of annexation, Prince Faisal bin Farhan, the KSA foreign minister, condemned the Israeli intentions to annex parts of the West Bank. He considered it a grave escalation that threatens the chances to resume the peace process in order to achieve security for all parties. He also called upon the Muslim countries to work together against the Israeli “aggression.”²²

The Kingdom also chose to speak directly to the Israeli public opinion but through unofficial channels. Its message was clear: normalization of the relations with Israel is linked to solving the Palestinian-Israeli conflict and the annexation would force the Gulf States and other Arab countries to stop their good gestures towards Israel.

¹⁶ Yousef Al-Otaiba, “Annexation will be a serious setback for better relations with the Arab world”, Ynet, 12 June 2020.

Retrieved from: <https://www.ynetnews.com/article/H1Gu1ceTL>

¹⁷ Rami Ayyub, “In rare appeal to Israeli public, UAE warns against annexation”, Reuters, 12 June 2020. Retrieved from: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-israel-palestinians-annexation-emirat/in-rare-appeal-to-israeli-public-uae-warns-against-annexation-idUSKBN23J0ZT>

¹⁸ Ronen Bergman and Ben Hubbard, “Israel Announces Partnership With U.A.E., Which Throws Cold Water On It”, New York Times, 26 June 2020. Retrieved from: <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/25/world/middleeast/israel-united-arab-emirates-coronavirus.html>

¹⁹ “Israel convey a message to the Palestinian President through Jordan: the Annexation will not include the Jordan Valley”, Maannews, 26 June 2020. Retrieved from: <https://www.maannnews.net/news/2011255.html>

²⁰ “The UAE, Bahrain and Jordan refuse the annexation to lands in West Bank”, Euronews, 18 June 2020. Retrieved from: <https://arabic.euronews.com/2020/06/18/jordan-bahrain-and-uae-condemn-the-israeli-plan-to-annex-territories-in-the-west-bank>

²¹ “Interview with Anwar Garghash” American Jewish Committee, AJC Facebook, 16 June 2020. Retrieved from: https://web.facebook.com/AJCGlobal/videos/2687543351533798/?_rdc=1&_rdr, see the period from 00:23:00-00:31:00

²² “Saudi Foreign Minister: We Condemn Israel Plans for Annexation”, Alarabiya, 10 June 2020. Retrieved from: <https://www.alarabiya.net/ar/arab-and-world/2020/06/10/cfdc>

On June 8th, Nawaf Obaid, an academic and former advisor to the Saudi government published an OP-ED in the Israeli Haaretz newspaper in which he illustrated the efforts the Kingdom has been doing for two decades to achieve peace with Israel based on the Arab Peace Initiative, which the Kingdom has proposed in 2002. Entitling his article “Led by Saudi Arabia, We Arabs Are Talking Peace. But Israelis Aren’t Listening”, he announced that the message of the crucial Arab states was consistent since “we are going to reciprocate progress on the Palestinian entrance with progress in bilateral relations and regional cooperation with Israel.” He reminded the Israelis that the gestures the Gulf States have taken toward Israel including “shortening Israelis’ journey time to the Far East by overflying the airspace” of KSA; the reconciliatory statements toward Israel made by Bahrain’s international minister, the UAE’s UN envoy, and others were meant to convince the Israelis of the importance of peace, cooperation, prosperity, safety and stability.

However, Obaid noted that this entire evolutionary process rested on a single premise that when the Israelis see that Arabs’ says match their deeds, they would elect leaders who dedicated themselves to negotiate a two-state solution to end the conflict. He concluded by reminding the Israelis that “a unilateral annexation will ship the area one clear message: Israel has determined to slam the door shut on a negotiated two-state answer, and with it on all hope of normalizing relations with the Arab and the wider Muslim world.”²³

Conclusions

While the UAE is against the Israeli plan of annexation, its position from keeping the lines of communications opened with Israel is yet to be decided. If Israel annexed the Jordan Valley and the entire settlements, the UAE will find it hard to maintain, at least, the public aspects of normalization with Israel taking into consideration the opposition of Jordan, the Palestinian Authority and the international community. However, the security coordination with Israel might remain because of its secret nature. If Israel annexed only parts of the settlements, the UAE would still condemn this step, but its line of communications would remain opened. This is partly because the reaction of Jordan and the international community will not amount to imposing sanctions on Israel.

The KSA does not have a public aspect in its relations with Israel. The annexation of small or large parts of the West Bank, will only make it harder for the KSA to move in the direction of normalization with Israel. The Kingdom is committed to its 2002 Peace Initiative as repeatedly declared in all of its official statements: normalizing the relations with Israel will only take place when the Palestinian-Israeli conflict is resolved in a way acceptable to the Palestinians.

²³ Nawaf Obaid, “Led by Saudi Arabia, We Arabs Are Talking Peace. But Israelis Aren’t Listening”, Haaretz, 18 June 2020. Retrieved from: <https://qoshe.com/haaretz/nawaf-obaidd/led-by-saudi-arabia-we-arabs-are-talking-peace-b/76546765>

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