



Consequences of the Normalisation of Relations between Israel and Gulf States

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The normalisation of relations with Israel undertaken by the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Bahrain is one of the most important processes affecting the political situation in the Middle East. The process weakens the Palestinian leadership and strengthens the bloc of countries competing with Iran and Turkey, which may increase tensions in the region. The level of involvement of U.S. diplomacy and the lack of opposition from Arab League (AL) members indicate that Israeli-Arab normalisation—beneficial from the EU perspective—will deepen.

Normalisation. The formal basis for the recognition of Israel by the UAE and Bahrain are the [Abrahamic Agreements](#), signed with the participation of the U.S. on 15 September. The establishment of official relations allows expanding the previously secret [cooperation between Israel and the Gulf states](#). Its foundation was position convergence on the perception of security threats in the region, identified with Iranian policies and the activities of non-state Islamist groups associated with the Muslim Brotherhood and supported by such states as Turkey and Qatar.

The Israeli-Arab rapprochement, [supported by the administration of U.S. President Donald Trump](#), has led to a revision in the foreign policy of Arab states that had previously tied the normalisation of relations with Israel with the resolution of the Palestinian issue in accordance with the Arab Peace Initiative (API) adopted by the AL in 2002. The actions of the UAE and Bahrain signal a decline in the importance of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict for Arab states. At the same time, this conflict remains an integral part of normalisation, which is conditioned with the suspension of the [annexation West Bank settlements](#) by Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's government. In addition to U.S. diplomacy, Saudi Arabia is also involved in promoting the normalisation process. The Saudi government remains Bahrain's main political patron—its consent was necessary for the recognition of Israel. Saudi Arabia also has opened airspace for flights between Israel and the Gulf states.

The parties involved are working to extend the normalisation process to the states that still do not recognise Israel. Sudan is a probable candidate for normalisation, as establishing relations with Israel would be a condition for concluding a broader agreement with the U.S. that includes removal from the "State Sponsors of Terrorism" list. Other African members of the AL, such as Morocco, are also potential candidates. Among the Gulf states, Oman could join the normalisation group, although this would weaken its role as a neutral intermediary in the region. Kuwait and Qatar are unlikely candidates, although Qatar maintains cooperation with Israel on the transfer of support to the Gaza Strip.

Despite Saudi Arabia's involvement in the normalisation process, the chances it will recognise Israel are small. This is because of internal conditions, including the Saudis' role as the symbolic leaders of the Muslim world. To limit criticism of the authorities, the Saudi leadership declared that the API (Saudi Arabia initiated it) remains in force despite the breaches by the UAE and Bahrain. The most likely scenario assumes further Saudi support for the normalisation process itself, continuing covert cooperation with Israel on security issues, mitigating anti-Israel rhetoric, or meetings with its representatives at multilateral forums. The UAE will also be actively involved in deepening Israeli-Arab cooperation in the region while strengthening its [network of influence](#).

Palestinian Context. The establishment of relations between Bahrain and the UAE with Israel and the lack of

opposition from other Arab states poses a serious political challenge to the Palestinian leadership. The provisions of the Abraham Agreements refer to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in very general language, without any mention of the existing peace process framework and the conditions of the API, such as the establishment of the Palestinian capital in East Jerusalem. This signifies a split in the common Arab position on the Palestinian issue and the loss of Palestinian influence on negotiations about Israeli-Arab normalisation. Fatah and Hamas have condemned the Gulf states' policy shift, but Palestinian attempts to mobilise opposition in the AL have failed. At the AL meeting held on 9 September, there was no condemnation of the UAE's actions, although continued support for Palestinian independence was emphasised.

At the same time, the normalisation process might force Israel to limit its activities in the Palestinian territories. It [stopped](#) plans to annex the settlements, which would pose a danger to the stability of the Palestinian Authority (PA). Intensifying support for Israeli settlers in the West Bank or tightening the policy towards the Gaza Strip would burden the image of its Arab partners and disturb the development of new relations.

At the political level, normalisation has become an impulse for a return to negotiations on reconciliation between Hamas and Fatah—the parties announced an agreement to hold overdue elections for PA institutions. It is also possible that the Arab states will become more deeply involved in internal Palestinian politics, primarily regarding the succession of power [after Mahmoud Abbas](#). Normalisation strengthens his political competitor, Mohammed Dahlan, the former leader of Fatah who has ties to the UAE and U.S. governments.

Impact in the Region. Security cooperation is an important element of the Israeli-Arab normalisation. Part of the deal—initially denied by the Netanyahu government—was Israel's consent to the transfer of advanced American (but also Israeli) weaponry to the Gulf states, primarily F-35s. The UAE and Israel also announced cooperation in countering cyberthreats.

Relations with the U.S. remain the main point of reference in the Arab states' decisions to normalise relations with Israel. The process itself is also a tool to achieve U.S. goals, especially the Trump administration's declared transfer of responsibility for maintaining security to regional actors and reducing the presence of American forces in the Middle East. The U.S. will act to institutionalise the process—the Abraham Agreements include a declaration about

establishing a wider format for regional cooperation, including in the strategic dimension.

A normalisation process that consolidates U.S. allies in the Middle East is exacerbating the competition between them and rival regional blocs led by Iran and Turkey. Both of the latter countries strongly condemned Israel's agreements with the UAE and Bahrain. Iran and Turkey may increase their support for Palestinian groups disenchanted with the attitude of some Arab allies and, through political influence in the region, hinder the expansion of the normalisation process. Moreover, for Iran, the official Israeli presence in the UAE and Bahrain (e.g., the transfer of military technology) may be treated as a strategic challenge and an impulse for escalation in the ongoing conflict in the [Persian Gulf](#).

Conclusions. The degree of involvement of the UAE and Bahrain and the reactions of other Arab states indicate that normalisation with Israel will be a permanent element in the evolution of the political situation in the Middle East. The attractiveness of cooperation with this country outweighs the interests in the Palestinian issue, although it remains a point of reference for the Arab states. An escalation of violence in the Palestinian territories could disrupt the normalisation process, although it remains unlikely at the moment. Normalisation creates new opportunities for economic cooperation, including for countries outside the region—the UAE and Israel are among Poland's most important trade partners in the Middle East. However, the proper estimation and potential gains from these relations (including in tourism or re-export) probably will remain restrained by the ongoing [COVID-19 pandemic](#). Another limitation to the extension of normalisation is the hostility common among Arab societies towards Israel, which their leaders must factor into their political calculations. Extending normalisation will be a U.S. priority if Trump is re-elected. If Joe Biden wins, the process may slow down, but it will not stop.

The normalisation of Israel's relations with Gulf states is supported by EU institutions and Member States, as it has prevented annexations in the West Bank. From the EU perspective, this process is beneficial as long as it leads to confidence-building and fosters stabilisation in the Middle East. It can also act as an impulse for changes in EU policy, for example, by participating in future new formats of regional cooperation. At the same time, if the EU wishes to maintain its influence on Israeli-Palestinian relations, it must be ready to increase political and financial support for Palestine in the face of the clear reduction of Arab state involvement.