

Well, you could say that the Israel/United Arab Emirates peace agreement, brokered with the assistance of the Trump Administration, has elements of both. It hasn't actually been signed yet, and it isn't genuinely a 'peace agreement', since the UAE wasn't at war with Israel. As a mordant Israeli headline put it, 'Instead of the Palestinians, Israel makes peace with the UAE'.

But the agreement does represent a breakthrough, in that the covert – namely the fact of close working relations between Israel, especially in the security sphere – has become overt, and a third Arab state has agreed publicly to normalise relations with Israel, following the long ago example of Egypt and Jordan. It forms a clear breach in the terms of the Arab Peace Initiative (API, closely associated with the late King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia), which made normalisation with Israel conditional on withdrawal from all occupied territory to pre-June 1967 borders and the establishment of a Palestinian state with its capital in East Jerusalem.

The agreement serves the interests of all three parties:

ISRAEL

- it is a welcome and much needed 'win' for Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin 'Bibi' Netanyahu. It's a distraction from his current legal and Covid related difficulties, and a consolation prize for the fact that his annexation plans in the West Bank ran into unexpected headwinds from his own Right Wing as well as within the governing coalition and even from the Trump Administration (preoccupied with more pressing issues);
- Bibi is currently looking to have it both ways. To the outside world, he presents himself as having chosen peace. To the settler movement at home he emphasises that annexation, which almost all states apart from the current US administration regard as illegal under international law, is only 'suspended'. In reality, Bibi's annexation plans were put into indefinite suspense some while ago, and he is making a virtue of necessity. A further plus for him is that, with the focus on annexation or non-annexation, we now hear little or nothing about occupation or the ongoing reality of creeping annexation;
- the agreement should open new markets in UAE and elsewhere in the Gulf. Much trade as well as IT and security cooperation is already happening. But the Emiratis are said to be keen to acquire advanced Israeli weapons systems, and Israel may well now be ready to sell them kit such as the Iron Dome anti-missile system, which would improve the UAE's defensive capability against Iran. Also, Israel's national carrier El Al plan to fly direct to Abu Dhabi, though this – major caveat – would require them to overfly Saudi.

UAE

- as noted above, the Gulf States have had increasingly close working relations with Israel for at least the past decade. To some extent, such cooperation could be described as a major 'achievement' of Iranian policy and practices, in that countering Iran has become the overriding security preoccupation of the Gulf states;
- there was never much warmth in the Gulfies' commitment to the Palestinian cause. Great damage was done when Yasser Arafat sided with Saddam Hussein over the invasion of Kuwait in 1990. Nevertheless, lip service was paid to the concept of a two state solution as per the API. Even this has eroded in the last few years, as manifested by the muted reaction to the move of the US embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, not to mention the terms of President Trump's Deal of the Century, which

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essentially tore up the prevailing orthodoxy on Israel/Palestine, ignored key UN Security Council resolutions and envisaged the annexation by Israel of large chunks of the West Bank;

- against this background, the Abraham Accord plays well for UAE. It puts credits in the UAE's account with the US by helping Trump in the run up to November's elections. It allows them to take credit in the Arab world for 'stopping' annexation. It opens the way to a further deepening of ties with Israel, which they have been doing anyway. As a further bonus, it's a thumb in the eye of their enemy President Erdogan of Turkey, and it's one up on their other enemy, Qatar. What's not to like?
- underlying UAE policy is the fact that they are not uncomfortable with Israeli occupation of Palestinian territory. What they – and the Saudis under MbS – don't want is to be embarrassed by formal annexation by Israel, which would force them into public criticism. That risk is off the table for now, but not eliminated.

US

- it's a win for President Trump in the runup to the November election. It serves a valuable PR purpose as a first fruit of the Deal of the Century. It consolidates Trump's standing with the large Evangelical element of his support base, as well as with some but by no means all Jewish voters as the most Israel-friendly President in US history. It bolsters Trump's claim to international leadership while in practice deferring all difficult decisions until after the Presidential election. It also opens the way to valuable defence sales to UAE: there is talk of a deal involving F-35's, though Israel has yet to give the go ahead.

WHAT NEXT?

The agreement is essentially a move done for reasons of presentation rather than substance. It hasn't been signed yet. Meanwhile, the Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi (widely known as MbZ) has described it as a 'roadmap', not a final deal. The Palestinians have criticised the agreement in strident terms, but their voice counts for little in practical terms. And the President of the Palestinian Authority, Mahmoud Abbas, is now very old and well past his sell by date. He refuses to deal with either the US or Israel and in addition is heartily disliked by MbZ. UAE hosts one of Abbas's most vocal opponents, Mohamed Dahlan, who plainly schemes to succeed him and can count on financial support from MbZ.

Naturally enough, there is speculation that UAE will be followed by other Arab states. The front runners in this field are Bahrain and Sudan, but it would be surprising if either moved any time soon. Saudi already has close sub rosa links with Israel, and MbZ very likely consulted MbS before acting. But it would be a veritable earthquake if Saudi formally normalised relations this side of a settlement of the Israel/Palestine issue. Oman is also mentioned as a candidate for normalisation, and Bibi paid a visit there in 2018, but the Omanis are always very careful and prudent in their formal actions.

Bottom line: as so often with Bibi, it pays to read the fine print very carefully, and to count one's fingers afterwards. Nevertheless, making every allowance for scepticism, the Accord – if and when signed – does in my opinion represent some shifting of the tectonic plates in the Middle East. What it doesn't do, in any way, is advance the prospects of a just and lasting settlement of the Palestinian issue.

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