



## ISRAEL-UAE DEAL EXPLAINED

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**Joshua Holo:** Welcome to the College Commons Podcast, passionate perspectives from Judaism's leading thinkers, brought to you by the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, America's first Jewish institution of higher learning. My name is Joshua Holo, Dean of HUC's Jack H. Skirball campus in Los Angeles, and your host.

**JH:** Welcome to the College Commons Podcast where we have the pleasure of once again speaking in-depth with Jordan Reimer on the Middle East. Jordan R. Reimer is a policy analyst at the RAND Corporation, working in the Defense and Political Sciences Department. He has served as a policymaker at the State Department, Department of Defense, and Joint Staff. Prior to joining RAND in 2017, he worked as an Intelligence Analyst for the New York City Police Department, where he specialized in counter-terrorism investigations. He is also a member of the Council on Foreign Relations. Jordan Reimer, thank you so much for joining us on the podcast.

**Jordan Reimer:** Thank you for having me back. It's a pleasure to be here.

**JH:** The main topic of our conversation is going to be the very recent mutual recognition and opening of diplomatic relations between the United Arab Emirates and Israel. But before we get into the meat of that deal and its consequences and challenges and opportunities, I'd like to first give our audience the opportunity to hear from you about the UAE, United Arab Emirates, as a country. Who is this new partner for Israel in the world stage?

**JR:** The United Arab Emirates is a relatively new country that was formed in the 1970s, part of what used to be called the Trucial States under UK protection. And so it's seven independent emirates or little states that came together under the banner of a single country. The two largest that are probably most familiar are Abu Dhabi, which has a lot of oil and gas and is therefore the senior partner, and Dubai, which has become a commercial center. And so, the Emirates is a country of only about a million citizens, but 10 million people. So the vast, vast majority of the people who live there are actually foreign workers.

**JH:** Do they share only an army and foreign relations? Or do they have more in common, like the United States?

**JR:** They each have their own little constitutive assembly in each of the seven states, like a state government, although these are not truly democratic institutions reflective

necessarily of the citizenry. It's much more of a top-down country. But yes, they are seven independent emirates that came together to now operate as one entity. But for all intents and purposes, Abu Dhabi and Dubai really call the shots when it comes to anything related to foreign policy. They are by far the richest and most powerful.

**JH:** It sounds the way you set up the citizenship question that there might be structural or demographic problems built into the very makeup of the country in that they're outnumbered, the citizens are outnumbered 10 to one by non-citizens.

**JR:** Well, yes and no. Having such a small population allows the UAE the flexibility to engage in more, let's say "controversial" foreign policy decisions, ie, holding peace with Israel, because the population is so well-fed and is so granted the munificence of the Emirati government that there's not much of a domestic constituency for popular protest. From a foreign policy perspective, it appreciates the fact that its citizenry is so small.

**JH:** So that is one element of the nature of the country that you've just outlined as an opportunity that seems to have undergirded their capacity to engage with Israel. So can you give us some further background about the context for this deal with Israel, some of the broad strokes of its terms, the headliners, the main things we need to know about and perhaps why the UAE of all Arab countries would be willing to do this?

**JR:** So right now, it's just been an announcement that the UAE and Israel will be normalizing their relations; they will be trading ambassadors, they'll be opening up embassies in each other's countries. Citizens can travel to each country on their own respective passports, and then they will sign a series of deals regarding investment, tourism, security cooperation, telecommunications and so on and so forth. And then not part of the bilateral relationship, but Israel has agreed to either suspend or cancel its announced plans to annex parts of the West Bank and the Jordan Valley in accordance with Trump's peace plan. So Israel, Bibi Netanyahu said Israel will not go forward and annex those territories. And in exchange, the UAE is willing to have bilateral peace and relations with Israel.

**JR:** So that is the announcement. What's behind the announcement? Now, this announcement did not come out of the blue. Israel and the UAE... And as we talked last time on the podcast, Israel and the UAE share a foreign policy outlook when it comes to developments in the Middle East. We talked about the meta wars, that there are two meta wars in the Middle East, and that is still a framework that is still very much relevant today. Those two meta wars would be the effort against Iran, a Sunni-Shia conflict, the UAE as a Sunni state fighting against Iran as a Shia state and their proxies across the region. And similarly, an intra-Sunni conflict where you have the UAE as a more authoritarian traditionalist power, wanting to maintain a pre-Arab Spring status quo fighting against political Islamists and democratic uprisings throughout the region.

**JR:** And so Israel is very much on the side of the UAE and Saudi Arabia in both of those fights, both against Iran and against greater power for political Islamists and their allies like Qatar and Turkey. Especially in the wake of the Obama administration's signing or negotiating the Iran nuclear deal, the UAE and Israel have been brought much closer

together in their shared foreign policy outlook and have been working with each other for a long time in the security realm. There's been a lot of under the radar trade going on. And frankly over the past several years, there's been more and more openness towards showing that Israeli leaders and ministers have been meeting with and traveling to the UAE to really show that these relations are not below the surface, but actually above the surface.

**JH:** So you understandably cite the importance of the security outlook as one of the undergirding opportunities that promoted this announcement, which begs the following question based on what we've been seeing in the news about the F-35 in particular, but arm sales in general, as what appears to be an important sticking point between Israel and the UAE or America. It's not clear to me. Perhaps you can illuminate some of that.

**JR:** Well, first, let me just take the opportunity to nerd out on what the F-35 is. The F-35 is called a Joint Strike Fighter. Most planes serve one purpose. Some are bombers, so that means they drop bombs. Some are for ground combat, which means that they shoot missiles and ammunition at people who are fighting on the ground. And some are fighter jets like in Top Gun, they are made for air fights, to shoot at other planes that may want to attack a bomber. The F-35 Joint Strike Fighter is all of this in one. It does both strike capability and fighting capability. It can fight in the air against other planes that are attacking it, but it could also drop bombs. So add to that the fact that it has very advanced surveillance capability, and is also a stealth plane, which means it can fly without being detected. It is a very advanced plane.

**JR:** Israel is the only country in the Middle East that has the F-35. And by US law, the US cannot sell weapons to other countries in the Middle East if it will remove Israel's "qualitative military edge," QME. Essentially, the United States Congress says Israel is surrounded by potential enemies and therefore, Israel's military capability has to be better than any potential combination of any potential enemies in the region. And so, Israel is therefore somewhat hesitant for other countries to get such an advanced weapon like the F-35 or advanced drones because there is a concern that that might remove Israel's qualitative military edge, its QME.

**JR:** And so the question becomes, with the UAE, you might say, "Well, Israel and the UAE are now announcing peace. That's fantastic." Israel says, "Absolutely, but we know, we've been in the region for a long time. Just because they're a friend today doesn't necessarily mean that the UAE will be a friend 20 or 30 years from now." Just like how Israel and Iran were very close in the 1950s, '60s and '70s, until the Iranian Revolution. And so Israel is therefore hesitant to allow other countries, including the UAE from getting these advanced types of weapons.

**JH:** Part of the news coverage was that it wasn't clear if it was rumor or in fact reliable that the United States really was toying with the idea of selling the F-35 to the UAE.

**JR:** That is what the Trump administration is hinting at, that it wants to sell advanced weaponry and notified Congress that it will be violating a weapons export treaty or understanding to allow itself to sell the UAE advanced drones. Those sales haven't

gone through because you need congressional approval. And again, Israel would likely want to weigh in. But it is something that the Trump administration is seriously considering and Bibi Netanyahu has openly declared that Israel is not a fan of these sales. So I think the question becomes it's very much TBD.

**JH:** So that brings us now to the United States and its role in this deal, which you've so clearly outlined for us. Tell us how active was the US in brokering this deal or announcement, and what was its role in nature?

**JR:** Frankly, it's unclear. If press reports are to be believed, then Jared Kushner was integral in pushing this deal over the finish line. But I think, again, it's important to emphasize that Israel and the UAE have had strong relations for years outside of the United States, a bilateral, strong relationship. And frankly, a bilateral relationship sometimes in opposition to the United States, such as the Obama administration's efforts to sign the nuclear deal or to engage Iran. And so Israel and the UAE have had this relationship without necessarily the US coaxing it along. Of course, it's helpful that the US is facilitating this relationship, but the US is not the kingmaker here.

**JR:** The story goes that earlier this summer, as Bibi was making stronger and stronger noises that he would begin annexation of parts of the West Bank and the Jordan Valley in accordance with the Trump peace plan, Yousef Al Otaiba, the Emirati Ambassador to the United States, published an op-ed in Yedioth Ahronoth, an Israeli newspaper in Hebrew. So you have the Emirati ambassador writing an op-ed in Hebrew that was entitled, It's Either Normalization or Annexation. Meaning, you can't have both. If you start annexing, there's no way the UAE will ever normalize ties with Israel.

**JR:** And so the report goes that influential foreign policy figures pushed Jared Kushner to actually reach out to Yousef Al Otaiba and say, "Okay, we'll put up or shut up. If it's either annexation or normalization, what if Israel doesn't do annexation? Are you therefore saying that you'll do normalization?" And it's reported that that is what actually fostered this normalization announcement. And therefore, Bibi suspended plans to annex parts of the West Bank and Jordan Valley.

**JH:** How strong is the speculation that Netanyahu actually staged the annexation buildup in rhetoric precisely to precipitate some other geopolitical consequence?

**JR:** So that I couldn't say 'cause he has his own domestic constituencies to please, but I will say that it's a pretty genius move. So he gave up something that never actually happened. It's like negotiation 101. You create a value for something and then you give it up, so you haven't actually lost anything but the other person, the other side thinks that they gained something. But I would also say this. Ironically, by not following the Trump peace plan, which allowed for annexation, this has actually enabled larger regional peace, and the Trump administration seems to be fine with it, but this actually goes against what the Trump peace plan actually allowed for.

**JH:** So speaking of annexation and the narrower political context of Israel, vis-a-vis, the Palestinians, I read a report in Al Jazeera online that really articulated very passionately

a sense of betrayal by the Palestinians toward the Emiratis for their rapprochement to Israel. Weigh in for us a little bit about some of the predictable, reasonable, understandable positions of the Palestinians in relation to this deal. Are they justified in feeling betrayed? Is that a posture? What do you think?

**JR:** Well, the first thing I would say is, whenever you're dealing with Middle East media, you have to know your sources. And so it's not surprising that Al Jazeera would push this line. It may well be true. I'm not saying that Al Jazeera made it up, but you have to know your sources. Al Jazeera is funded by the Qatari government, which is an enemy of the UAE. The UAE and Saudi Arabia announced an embargo on Qatar and cut off all its trade with Qatar, removed its ambassadors. Really, really tried to strangle Qatar.

**JH:** Qatar being a neighbor both of Saudi Arabia and the UAE.

**JR:** Correct. Another one of these small states that's dwarfed by Saudi Arabia on one side and Iran on the other. And so it's just important for context to understand that it's not surprising that Al Jazeera would push a line that tries to show that the Emirates are acting way out of the mainstream for the Arab people and trying to undermine Arab and Muslim unity, but let's take it at face value. Yes, the Palestinians absolutely feel betrayed by this. I believe Saeb Erekat, who's the Palestinian main negotiator, talked about being stabbed in the back by this announcement. But let's also be clear that the Palestinians have felt betrayed by the UAE many times already, especially in recent history.

**JR:** Before this announcement of normalization, it was the tacit UAE endorsement of the Trump peace plan. In fact, because of that tacit endorsement, the Palestinians rejected UAE aid when they sent over medical aid because of the Coronavirus in March of this year, before normalization. And before that, the Palestinians were upset at the UAE for their lack of response to Trump's recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's capital. More geopolitically, the UAE hosts Mohammed Dahlan as a senior advisor. Mohammed Dahlan is a former confidant of Yasser Arafat, who was actually the Security Chief for Gaza, for Fatah. So Hamas obviously hates Mohammed Dahlan because Hamas right now controls Gaza, but always had a primary base of operations in Gaza, and so he was the Arafat security chief in charge of keeping Hamas squelched. And similarly, as one of Arafat's confidants, Mahmoud Abbas, who's the current head of the Palestinian Authority, the leader of Fatah, also doesn't get along well with Mohammed Dahlan and feels that Mohammed Dahlan is trying to undermine his agenda. So the Palestinians across the spectrum agree that the UAE is not their favorite, given their close work with Mohammed Dahlan.

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**JH:** Before we return to the podcast, we wanna let you know about digital learning on the College Commons Platform. Beyond this podcast, which is available to the public at large, check out the online courses at [collegecommons.huc.edu](https://collegecommons.huc.edu) for in-depth learning, digital syllabi, assignments, inspiration for teaching and one of our most influential courses called Making Prayer Real. Subscribe with your synagogue for all this and

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**JH:** So I'd like to ask you to speculate a bit on some of the ripple effects that this announcement/normalization may ultimately have by playing out two scenarios for us. One scenario, in which we assume that the deal goes through and it succeeds bilaterally in the mutual goals of Israel and the UAE. And as a consequence, that success promotes regional stability. And then I'd like you to play out a second scenario for us in which the deal also succeeds bilaterally, but ends up destabilizing rather than stabilizing the region.

**JR:** The first thing I would say is that I don't think that this deal could promote regional stability, but we can imagine a scenario where this deal succeeds bilaterally and promotes greater regional engagement with Israel, where this is the first of many dominoes to fall of countries to recognize Israel. There's already rumors that Bahrain, Sudan, Oman, Morocco are lining up to normalize relations with Israel. That would gradually allow Israel and Israelis to become more integrated in the region, which is certainly a good thing. So that is, if the deal succeeds bilaterally, then that would have greater knock on regional effects, but I would quibble with the use of the term, stability, because let's be honest, Israel or Arab-Israeli peace hasn't been central to the current lack of stability in the Middle East. You have civil wars in Libya, Yemen, Syria, ongoing protests in Lebanon, you have ongoing political transitions in Algeria and Sudan, you have repeated discontent in Iran and Iraq. So even if the so-called, Arab Street doesn't rise up in protest against UAE normalization with Israel, there still won't be regional stability.

**JH:** Just to further clarify, what you're saying is, there's a limit to its capacity to have a consequence regardless, because the force majeure going on are so powerful?

**JR:** Exactly. In terms of your other scenario where this deal succeeds bilaterally, but destabilizes the region, I think that that is a possibility. And let's go back to what we talked about before, which is the meta wars. You have the Sunni-Shia conflict and this intra-Sunni conflict where these traditionalist monarchal powers are fighting against popular Islamists and people fighting for more democratic governance. So one scenario that you could have, and I don't necessarily think this is true, but we're engaging in a hypothetical here, is that the UAE could pocket its relationship with Israel and therefore feel that it has even more ability to engage in its destabilizing activity across the region. The UAE is very much at front and center in a lot of the destabilizing activity that's happening in the region, and it might feel, "Well, now that I have the US in my pocket, I have Israel in my pocket, and I have built up such goodwill in normalizing relationships with Israel, I could engage in furthering my foreign policy military objectives without facing any blowback."

**JR:** So theoretically, they could ratchet up the pressure on Iran, they could increase

their military support for this renegade general in Libya, they could further support the Sudanese military to stop cooperating with the Sudanese civilian opposition and the shared National Unity government that's happening right now in Sudan. So there are ways that the UAE could feel empowered to further destabilize the region, knowing that it has built up sufficient goodwill. I don't think that its newly unveiled relationship with Israel will necessarily cause the UAE to make those calculations. I think the UAE will make those calculations regardless of its relationship with Israel, and again, I don't think that the UAE will necessarily make a lot of those calculations. The UAE is actually ratcheting down its fight with Iran to a large degree, and I don't necessarily see that the new Israel component will necessarily allow the UAE or compel the UAE to be more hostile across the region.

**JH:** So your feeling is that both the consequence and the benefit in general of this agreement when it materializes, really is limited most meaningfully in the bilateral realm between UAE and Israel, and you do seem to feel like it's a probable win for both.

**JR:** Exactly. I view this very much as a bilateral issue because frankly, Israel and the UAE were already cooperating on regional activity. So this normalization wouldn't necessarily cause this regional cooperation to increase 'cause it was already happening to a very significant degree insofar as it might allow the US to sell greater weapons to the UAE, that could again be a signal to the UAE to engage in more destabilizing behavior across the region, but we even see that Israel is hesitant to allow the UAE to get those weapons, despite this newly announced normalization.

**JH:** So I'd like to close with the perennial question that every Israel watcher has been asking since peace with Egypt, or even before, in so far as there is the sense of dominoes as one Arab country recognizes Israel and then another follows, that there might be some sense of consequence, or maybe just momentum in general, always asking what the next Arab country will be that will recognize Israel. Thomas Friedman opined once that all the Israelis used to think that Lebanon would be the second country to recognize Israel, and he said it's gonna be the second to last country to recognize Israel. But everyone has an opinion on this. What's yours?

**JR:** The Twitterati have been saying that Oman, Morocco, Bahrain, Sudan, all these countries could be next. I think what's helpful is rather than just list this alphabet soup of countries to actually think constructively about why are these the countries that are being named, and they're being named for very different reasons. So what I like to think of is that there are three buckets of countries that either have made or will make normalized relations with Israel, because the UAE was never technically at war with Israel. So the first bucket are those of necessity, and those would be Egypt and Jordan. Those that have fought wars with Israel, they never had real peace, they had ceasefires, armistices. And so in order to actually institute peace, they needed to make normalized relations with Israel, and that's why Egypt did it in the late 1970s, and then Jordan did it in 1994. But those peaces are very cold peaces. Yes, there are "normalized relations," but they're not very warm relations.

**JR:** The next bucket of Israel's partners are those of opportunity, like Oman, Morocco,

possibly Qatar, but Qatar isn't really being bandied about these days. Those are just countries that have independent foreign policies. Oman wants to get along with everybody, and that's why you actually had Bibi Netanyahu visiting Oman and meeting with the sultan and traveling around his palace. The Omani Sultan actually died since then, but it seems like the person who succeeded him seems to be continuing in the sultan's footsteps, but you never know if it might take him a few years to consolidate his power, but nevertheless, Oman seems to be continuing its "get along with everybody" foreign policy, and that's why Oman is being mentioned.

**JR:** Similarly with Morocco. Morocco and Israel have had relations for decades now under the current king and the previous king, Morocco really likes to emphasize its Jewish heritage, the fact that there are so many Israelis of Moroccan ancestry who are powerful in the Israeli government. There's a lot of tourism between the two countries. Morocco has always tried to be the leader of bringing the Arab world along to facilitate Israeli-Palestinian peace so that it could then normalize relations with Israel and have the whole Arab world normalize relations with Israel. This might be the impetus needed for Morocco to finally just again come out in the open, end the closeted relationship. So those would be countries of opportunity, that now they'll have the opportunity to actualize something that they may have wanted to do for a long time.

**JR:** The third bucket are those partners of strategy, for strategic reasons, and that's where the UAE fits in it. We talked about the UAE and the meta wars, and how Israel is aligned with the UAE on these meta wars, and therefore that is why they are now normalizing relations. Similarly, Bahrain and Sudan would fall into that bucket. Bahrain is also another one of these very small countries that sit on the Persian Gulf between much larger Saudi Arabia and Iran. Bahrain is actually a very interesting case because it is a Sunni monarchy that oversees a majority Shia population, and that's why you had an Arab Spring uprising in Bahrain in 2011, because the majority population didn't want to be ruled by a minority government, and that's why the Bahraini monarchy is so scared of its own people that it has aligned itself fully with Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, and Bahrain is almost like a trial balloon for Saudi Arabia. And so if Bahrain were to make peace with Israel, that would just be a knock on effect of the fact that the UAE has already done it, that Saudi Arabia is tacitly behind this. And so Bahrain doesn't have much of an independent foreign policy, let's say.

**JR:** And similarly, Sudan. Sudan is very much in a transition. Like I mentioned, there was an Arab Spring 2.0 just a few years ago that overthrew Omar Bashir, who himself had a strong relationship with both Iran and Al-Qaeda. The new leadership of Sudan is a quasi-military, quasi-civilian-led government, and the UAE and Saudi Arabia have tremendous influence on the military side of that equation, to such a degree that the civilian opposition and civilian protesters really were frustrated with how much the UAE and Saudi Arabia were backing up the military side in this transition, and they felt that these Gulf efforts were preventing a true democratic flourishing to occur.

**JR:** So if Sudan were to announce peace with Israel, and indeed Bibi Netanyahu met with the leader of Sudan, a general, if Sudan were to make peace with Israel, it would very much be because of this Saudi-UAE influence on the military side of the Sudanese



government equation. So these countries are not being thrown around in a vacuum, there's very deliberate reasons for each one of these countries being named.

**JH:** Well, on that note then, here's to more peace in the region, but most of all, thank you, Jordan Reimer, for your incredibly lucid, clear and engaging illustration of all of these questions that are so much on our minds. Thank you for taking the time and your explanations.

**JR:** My pleasure. This has been great.

**JH:** We hope you've enjoyed this episode of the College Commons Podcast, available wherever you listen to your podcasts or at the College Commons website: [Collegecommons.huc.edu](http://Collegecommons.huc.edu), where you can also stay tuned for future episodes.

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