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Arab Modernizers

*Israel's peace with the United Arab Emirates
is a model for a new Middle East*



EARLY IN THE PANDEMIC, a friend of mine introduced me to another friend of his, an Emirati living in the United Arab Emirates (UAE). Knowing that my academic research is focused on the geopolitics of the Arabian Gulf, he figured it might be interesting for me to meet someone from the region — and why not make an international acquaintance at a moment when all communications were virtual, anyway? Majid and I began speaking over Zoom, and the bond was instantaneous. We learned about each other's lives, families, dreams — the stuff of real friendship. When we finally met in person, in 2021, it was as though we had known each other since childhood.

As I've come to learn from other Israelis, my experience of flourishing friendship with Majid is not unique. After the signing of the Abraham Accords, Israelis and Emiratis took to meeting one

another on Zoom in high numbers. These remote introductions that defined global communication during the pandemic offered a kind of soft initial encounter between the two peoples. Since that time, professional interactions between Israelis and Emiratis have taken on an uncommon level of warmth. One Israeli CEO opened up to me about how his Emirati colleague affectionately calls him a “long-lost brother found,” a striking reflection of the familial resonance of the 2020 Abraham Accords and its namesake’s two sons.

It all might seem rather counterintuitive. Israel’s peace agreements with Egypt and Jordan are far older. Yet they don’t exhibit anything close to the 120 business-to-business agreements and memoranda of understanding signed with the UAE. As a point of comparison, it was reported in 2022 that Egypt and Israel were aiming to achieve \$700 million in annual trade by 2025. The United Arab Emirates saw \$2.56 billion of trade with Israel in 2022, accompanied by investments exceeding \$3.5 billion.

At 46 and 30 years, respectively, the peace agreements with Egypt and Jordan have also begun to show signs of aging. The official reactions of both countries to Israel’s war with Hamas have been quite critical of Israel, with Jordan recalling its ambassador and Egypt publicly threatening to nullify the Camp David Accords. The UAE, by contrast, has exhibited a more balanced reaction. Lana Nusseibeh, a Palestinian Emirati and the UAE’s ambassador to the United Nations, has indeed issued condemnations of Israel’s actions and successfully led the adoption of Resolution 2712, which called for increased humanitarian aid to Gaza. However, her public statements have also included a dimension of sympathy and understanding for Israel, referring to the October 7 attacks as “horrific.” And the only Israeli ambassador to a Middle Eastern country who has remained in office throughout the war without recall or expulsion is Amir Hayek, Israel’s ambassador to the UAE.

Why? Because Israel's peace with the United Arab Emirates stands on a stronger foundation of emerging shared values and may well develop into a true national friendship.

In 2016, the UAE government established a ministry of tolerance. The UAE's commitment to religious toleration is a function of a broader cultural evolution that has been taking place in the country for several decades. On February 5, 2019, over a year before the signing of the Abraham Accords, UAE Minister of Foreign Affairs and International Co-operation Abdullah bin Zayed announced a plan to create the Abrahamic Family House in Abu Dhabi, an opulent complex containing the Imam Al-Tayeb Mosque, the St. Francis Church, and the Moses ben Maimon Synagogue—named in the spirit of interreligious dialogue. The announcement came during Pope Francis's visit to the Arabian Peninsula, the first ever by a pontiff, when he referred to the UAE as “a land that is trying to be a model of coexistence, of human brotherhood, and a meeting place among diverse civilizations and cultures.” In keeping with the nature of the visit, the pope and Sheikh Ahmed al-Tayeb signed the Document on Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together, also known as the Abu Dhabi Declaration. Worth noting is that despite the Egyptian heritage of both Maimonides and al-Tayeb (admittedly not exactly a philosemite), such an initiative was taken in the UAE rather than Egypt. Egypt has not had a chief rabbi since the 1972 departure of Rabbi Haim Moussa Douek for France and then New York. The UAE, by contrast, announced Rabbi Yehuda Sarna as the country's first chief rabbi in 2019.

Founded 23 years after Israel, the UAE is swiftly establishing itself as a technological focal point in the Arab world, marked by substan-

tial investments in knowledge-based entrepreneurship. Such entrepreneurship cultivates a sense of curiosity about other points of view and an interest in learning from those who have similar drives. As is well known, Israel has long been recognized as a global hub for cutting-edge technology, contributing groundbreaking inventions and knowledge to the international community. It is therefore no surprise that both nations demonstrate pioneering advancements in space industries, renewable energy, and other advanced technological fields within the region. Even Israel's entry into natural-gas production has not diminished its primary economic reliance on its intellectual human capital, a prioritization it shares with the UAE.

Another aspect of this cultural revolution has been educational. The Emirati government decided in 2021 to include Holocaust studies in its schools' textbooks. In parallel, the organization Sharaka (Arabic for "partnership"), founded on the basis of the Abraham Accords, "is working to shape a new Middle East, built on dialogue, understanding, cooperation and friendship." The organization has forged this path with its Holocaust Education Program, which brings joint Arab-Israeli delegations on an educational journey to Israel and Poland with the goal of learning the lessons of the Holocaust as an extreme expression of intolerance. The program aims to empower young leaders within these communities, nurturing them to become ambassadors of tolerance and coexistence.

As the first head of Middle East relations at the University of Haifa — a new position that would have been inconceivable a mere decade ago but emerged from the possibilities of the Abraham Accords — I can attest to the interest of scholars from both countries to work together. Nearly all Israeli universities have now engaged in some way with Emirati counterparts. The enthusiasm to join up with Israelis is even greater in Emirati think-tank institutes such as the Emirates Policy Center, the Anwar Gargesh Diplomatic Academy, Trends, and b'huth.

An Abu Dhabi workshop entitled “New Regionalism in the Middle East” in June of last year was a collaboration between four Emirati think tanks and Tel Aviv University’s Dayan Center, and was attended by researchers from the UAE, Israel, Bahrain, Oman, Jordan, Egypt, Morocco, and Turkey. The discussions, in which I participated, were deep, honest, and intriguing, tackling sensitive issues — such as the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif, Israel’s current right-wing government, and social differences — head-on. My conversations with female colleagues from the region were among the most eye-opening and empathic I have experienced in an academic or professional context; they left me inspired to work together with them in regional sisterhood.

However, the educational and cultural evolution within the UAE is also reflected in political terms in ways that present opportunities as well as challenges to Israel. Careful observation of the UAE’s foreign policy reveals that the Abraham Accords are part of a larger campaign to promote regional reconciliation. Beginning with Syria under Basha al-Assad’s leadership before extending to Iran, Israel, Turkey, and Qatar, the UAE has pursued normalization with Israel’s enemies as well. There are, of course, pros and cons to this. On the pro side, any initiative toward genuine regional peace might help create conditions of mutual understanding and advance Israel’s vision of being a country like all others with safe and secure borders. The UAE’s formal ties with Syria have already proven beneficial to Israel, particularly since they allowed the Emirates to play a role as mediator during the war.

On the con side, this collaboration might ultimately impose limitations on Israel in the future. Israel has constructed a narrative for its relations with the Arab Gulf states based on the concept of a shared adversary: Iran. Without this common enemy, history suggests, regional actors will return to traditional factional lines, and

the current phase of reconciliation in the Middle East may prove unsustainable in the long term. Owing to the evolving regional dynamics, Israel must explore new narratives to reinforce the legitimacy of its normalization with the Gulf countries, especially in light of the restoration of diplomatic relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran last year. Needless to say, these attempts at reconciliation and understanding are unprecedented.



More work remains to be done. The question is, who will do it? It is an open secret that Prime Minister Netanyahu is not widely regarded as the most trustworthy partner in the Gulf. The strained personal relations Bibi shares with Gulf leaders are evident in almost all discussions I've had with regional counterparts, and in the well-known fact that he has not publicly met with UAE President Mohamed bin Zayed. In contrast, bin Zayed has met with Israeli President Isaac Herzog twice, including once during the war, as well as with former Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett. During Bennett's term as prime minister and Yair Lapid's as foreign minister, they initiated the Negev Forum — a significant achievement for Israel's integration in the Middle East. Under the renewed term of Netanyahu, the differences are widely felt within the Israeli government offices. UAE media portray the current government as “ultranationalist and ultra-Orthodox,” and a series of actions and statements by the Israeli government had already strained relations before October 7. The saving grace is that these primary tensions are quite possibly temporary.

The wellsprings of connection between the two countries run deep, deeper than some of those with whom Israel has enjoyed non-hostile relations for decades. The Israel-UAE partnership is still in its infancy, on a complicated journey toward maturity that holds known

and unknown challenges. These challenges require ongoing commitment and collaboration. The partnership has proven durable thus far, weathering a perfect storm: the largest military conflagration for Israel in a generation. What has become clear is that both countries genuinely value prosperity for themselves and the other. Is there a stronger definition of regional friendship than that? *