



A New Arab-Israel Axis Against Iran? Where Does Saudi Arabia Stand?

OE Watch Commentary: On 13 August, Israel and the UAE signed an agreement establishing full diplomatic relations between the two countries. With this deal, the UAE became the third Arab state, after Egypt and Jordan, to fully recognize Israel. Shortly after, on 15 September, Bahrain followed suit. The accompanying passage by Middle East expert Ömer Taspınar provides insight into some of the significant implications these deals will have for Arab-Israel relations, Iran, the Palestinians and Saudi Arabia.

As the first passage discusses, the Israel-Palestinian issue will be less of a priority in the region. Countries in the region are no longer divided along where they stand on the Palestinian issue. Instead, the author writes “a new Israel-Arab axis is forming against Iran.” However, he also notes that this new axis will not be able to impact Iran much, unless Saudi Arabia joins it.

This raises the question of where Saudi Arabia stands on this issue. The author claims that the UAE and Bahrain would not have been able to sign these deals without some kind of green light from Saudi Arabia. He suggests that the Crown Prince Muhammed bin Salman (MbS) may be laying the groundwork for its own deal with Israel by letting others go first. The reasons for this are twofold, he argues. First, MbS may not be ready to take such a step, given that King Salman takes the Palestinian issue very seriously, fervently calling for a two-state solution to the issue. So, MbS may not think it is the right time. Second, the religious aspect (Wahhabism) is more dominant in Saudi Arabia. The author notes that Saudi Arabia still has a conservative religious structure, as opposed to the UAE, which is more secular. The author claims that MbS wants to go slower with Israel than the others for these reasons, but in the meantime, is “using back channel diplomacy” to clarify that “Saudi Arabia wants this but is not ready yet.” Therefore he concludes that yes, Saudi Arabia will likely follow eventually.

The expert also notes an ominous possible future scenario, in which Iran uses Hamas and Hezbollah to “provoke Israel to conduct a military operation in Gaza and the West Bank.” In this scenario, Qatar would use *Al Jazeera* to fill television screens with civilian Palestinians being killed, causing the Palestinian issue to become a top priority again. He points out that Iran and Qatar have this ability together (Iran via proxy powers and Qatar via *Al Jazeera*). (Also see: “The UAE-Israel Agreement: Implications for Defense and Airspace,” *OE Watch*, October 2020.)

End OE Watch Commentary (Kaya)



Flags of Israel and the UAE, together with the flag of Netanyahu, flown on Netanyahu's "Peace Bridge" August 2020, Netanya, Israel.

Source: TaBaZzz via Wikimedia, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Netanya_HW-2_IL_UAE_Flags_20200821_113130_08.jpg, CC by SA 4.0

“... MbS may be preparing the groundwork for [normalizing relations with Israel] by letting others go first.”

Source: Rusen Cakir, Ömer Taspınar, “Transatlantik: BAE-Bahreyn-İsrail Anlaşması, Doğu Akdeniz krizinde yumuşama, & ABD başkanlık seçimleri (Transatlantic: The UAE-Bahrain-Israel Agreement, a softening in the Eastern Mediterranean crisis & the US presidential elections),” *Medyascope/YouTube*, 16 September 2020. <https://medyascope.tv/2020/09/16/transatlantik-bae-bahreyn-israil-anlasmasi-dogu-akdeniz-krizinde-yumusama-abd-baskanlik-secimleri/>

...The Israel-Palestinian issue is a secondary issue [in the Middle East] now. Iran is much more central now. A new Israel-Arab axis is forming against Iran. But as long as Saudi Arabia doesn't join this axis, this won't impact Iran much. If Saudi Arabia joins this axis, the Middle East will become more polarized.

Some might say that these countries wouldn't be able to conduct a deal like this with Israel without consent from Saudi Arabia, and that might be true. The Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia Muhammed bin Salman (MbS) may not be ready to take such a step for Saudi Arabia yet but it does seem like they are preparing the groundwork for this by letting the others go first. But, there are also some differences between these countries and Saudi Arabia. King Salman still takes the Palestinian issue seriously. And he says he'd like to go back to the 1967 borders and to see a two-state solution to the Israel-Palestinian issue. So, Saudi Arabia takes this issue more seriously than Bahrain and the UAE.

Second, the religious aspect (Wahhabism) is more dominant in Saudi Arabia. They still have a conservative religious structure there; as opposed to the UAE where things are more secular, more financial, and socially different than Saudi Arabia, which is more conservative. And MbS wants to modernize and go slower with Israel than the others. It's using back channel diplomacy to say they want this but are not ready yet. MbS's message seems to be something like “I'm working on modernization, I'm moderate, I want to sit down with Israel, but the authoritarianism at home is to control the groups aligned with the Muslim Brotherhood. So, yes, Saudi Arabia may follow, but not right away.

*...Iran may use non-state actors (Hamas and Hezbollah) to provoke Israel to conduct a military operation in Gaza and the West Bank. If such a scenario takes place, Qatar would use *Al Jazeera* to create a picture where civilian Palestinians are killed. That's the main power of Qatar. *Al Jazeera* is very important, they are controlled by Qatar, but act as they are objective regarding the Middle East. But the whole thing is based on criticizing Israel, the UAE and Saudi Arabia. So if such a war breaks out, if Israel suddenly goes to war, this would fill the screens, and the Palestinian issue would reemerge. Qatar has this ability.*