

Briefing

Israel and UAE gulfs apart on normalisation priorities

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Washington, Tel Aviv, and the UAE all have very different reasons for pursuing normalisation of ties. The UAE has been driven by a desire to wield Israel against its rivals in the region. However, Israel seeks to woo UAE rivals Turkey and Qatar and target Iran, while the UAE seeks to woo Iran and target Turkey and Qatar. Mohamed Bin Zayed does not appear entirely assured of the benefits of normalisation, reflected in his absence from the signing ceremony in Washington.

This briefing explores the impetus for UAE normalisation of ties and how Abu Dhabi's aims may develop as it navigates these conflicting expectations.

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It is easier to understand UAE foreign policy when considering the perspective of Mohamed Bin Zayed on the regional geopolitics and the extent to which the UAE might be able to become an independent power despite its geographical and demographic limitations. Bin Zayed has witnessed how a small Gulf state in Qatar can become independent from Saudi Arabia, pursue its own independent foreign policy, find a seat at the same table with global powers, and successfully fend off any attempt by the larger neighbours to invade it or 'bring it into line', and even threatening the very security and stability of these neighbours.

There are three key pillars of Qatar's foreign policy that enabled it to achieve this relative independence:

- 1- It positioned itself as an indispensable ally to the US via Al-Udeid air base and opening offices for Hamas and the Taliban which meant Washington could only communicate with them through Qatar.
- 2- It led the way in breaking down taboos regarding Israel by launching its own overtures and establishing diplomatic channels since 1996, ensuring that whenever Saudi Arabia and UAE lobbied Washington against it, Israel would step in and insist to Washington that Qatar was a valuable country that should not be pressured (Israel relies on Qatar to give financial aid to Gaza and mediate with the Palestinian parties).
- 3- Qatar established an extensive media network with flexible and individual editorial policies depending on the region and target audience, allowing it to establish significant soft power in the Arab World and beyond.

The extent of Qatar's success was such that by the time the Arab Spring came, it was able to channel the protests and eventually threaten even Saudi Arabia itself which panicked at the rapid spread of popular discontent that claimed long-time US allies and former strongmen Zine al-Abdein Ben Ali of Tunisia, Muammar al-Gaddafi of Libya, Hosni Mubarak of Egypt, and Ali Abdullah Saleh of Yemen. In particular, Abu Dhabi noted the ability of Qatar to successfully lobby for NATO intervention in Libya when the protests stalled.

It is in this context that the UAE has now established numerous think tanks in European capitals and Washington, positioned itself as a major player in areas of interest to the US, helped Bin Salman rise to power in Riyadh enabling it to exert significant influence over Saudi domestic and foreign policy and ensure Riyadh never acts against its interests.

The problem however for the UAE is that despite its positioning itself for a greater role in the wider geopolitical and global issues, and despite its attempts to supplant Qatar's utility to Washington, Israel continues to protect Qatar and lobby in its favour against attempts by Riyadh and Abu Dhabi to isolate it. Moreover, Israel has actively lobbied to limit the extent of ties between Abu Dhabi and Washington, insisting that the latest technology and weaponry not be sold to the UAE and that Israel is allowed to preserve its military edge.

In a bid to win over Tel Aviv, and remove this stumbling bloc, Abu Dhabi decided to offer normalisation as a sign that it is prepared to be more of a vital and strategic ally than Qatar and that unlike Doha, it was prepared to compromise its entire standing in the Arab world and break new ground in Arab-Israel relations even if it meant upending the traditional status

quo prevalent in the region whereby Israel is deemed for all intents and purposes as a coloniser. Abu Dhabi believed that such an offer would be seized upon by Trump who is keen to present his foreign policy as a resounding success, and use the concept of normalisation of ties with Israel as a unique achievement of the Trump administration, succeeding where all his predecessors failed.

Tel Aviv excitedly agreed with the offer. However, Netanyahu continued to insist that F-35s not be sold to the UAE and Israel be allowed to preserve its military superiority. Moreover, he proceeded to humiliate the UAE by embarking on an 8-day bombing campaign against Gaza that undermined Bin Zayed's PR narrative that he had offered normalisation while negotiating the halting of annexation and preservation of Palestinian interests.

The humiliation was such that when Pompeo rushed to embark on a Middle East tour of Oman, Bahrain, and Sudan, to coax them into following the UAE's lead on normalisation, these states saw no practical or tangible benefits to normalisation that would offset the fierce public rebuke and demolition of religious soft power that continues to exert influence over the masses. UAE also pulled out of a signing ceremony of normalisation.

Since then, Washington has impressed upon Tel Aviv that normalisation of ties must be respected and that UAE demands should be accepted so as to encourage other Arab states to follow suit. Netanyahu has since been visibly silent on the issue of F-35s with rumours that the deal will go ahead in order to appease Abu Dhabi.

However, the real issue for Bin Zayed, and one that has caused enough concern that he decided against attending the signing ceremony in Washington personally, is that normalisation may not bring about what Bin Zayed seeks to achieve. Where the UAE seeks to leverage its new ties with Israel against its rivals Turkey and Qatar, Netanyahu is seeking to woo them. Articles in Israeli outlets have asserted in recent times the need for Israel to restore a working relationship with Turkey on security issues as tensions mount in Syria and the Eastern Mediterranean. Moreover, as the Palestinian factions become increasingly agitated at the 'betrayal' of the UAE, Tel Aviv is leaning more heavily on Qatar to act as a conduit to facilitate discussion with Palestinian factions and the putting up of funds to ensure an environment in Gaza that is less inclined to war.

Israel views normalisation as a means to contain Iran, which the UAE is keen to maintain good relations with. The UAE is Iran's second largest trading partner, has historically facilitated Tehran's circumvention of sanctions, avoids targeting Iran's proxies in Yemen, and has sought to present itself to Tehran as a credible mediator with Washington.

The UAE may well be considering that the benefits of normalisation may not lie with Tel Aviv, but with Washington. UAE analysts have suggested that Abu Dhabi may now be able to influence a Trump administration without the need of an Israeli mediator. Moreover, if the sale of F-35s materialises, it will be an example of the UAE trumping Israeli lobbying and a sign that Abu Dhabi is potentially able to influence Washington even at the expense of Israel, particularly if Trump wins a second term and continues a foreign policy built on transactionalism.

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