

FORMALISING A KNOWN REALITY

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: Effect of policies and politics of developed & developing countries on India's interests

File Photo: Abu Dhabi's Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed Al-Nahyan | Photo Credit: [AFP](#)

Several Western policymakers and analysts have touted the recently announced [normalisation agreement between the UAE and Israel](#) as a game changer in West Asia. U.S. President Donald Trump announced the agreement with great fanfare declaring, "This deal is a significant step towards building a more peaceful, secure and prosperous Middle East" and would lead to greater cooperation in the investment, tourism, security, technology, and energy sectors. UAE agreed to "full normalisation of relations" with Israel in exchange for the latter "suspending" annexation of parts of the occupied West Bank awarded to it by the [Trump-Kushner Plan](#).

While assessing the importance of the deal, one needs to answer two questions. First, is there anything really new about the agreement or does it merely formalise the *de facto* situation as it pertains to Israel's relations with the UAE and more broadly with the Gulf states? Second, who is the principal beneficiary of the [normalisation of relations between Israel and the UAE](#)?

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For those familiar with the development of Israel-UAE relations over the past few years, the agreement is more like a "coming out" party, than a radical departure from the current situation. It may have symbolic importance but does not add much to the substance of relations between the two countries whose collaboration, especially in the security and technology sectors, has been an open secret. Leading Israeli establishment figures have visited the UAE in the past couple of years.

The same applies to Israel's relations with other Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, especially Oman. In November 2019, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu visited Muscat and met publicly with the then-Sultan Qaboos bin Said. The next day, the Omani Foreign Minister called on GCC members to recognise Israel. The UAE's action opens the door for the establishment of formal diplomatic relations between Israel and other GCC states with Oman and Bahrain, who have openly welcomed the deal, likely to lead the way. Saudi Arabia may not follow suit immediately for fear that it may erode its credibility as the Keeper of the two holiest Muslim shrines, but it is clearly headed in that direction. In April 2019, the Saudi Crown Prince, endorsing the pro-Israel Trump peace proposal, declared, "The Palestinians need to accept [Trump's] proposal or stop complaining."

Who then benefits from the agreement? While Mr. Netanyahu has agreed to "suspend" annexation of parts of the West Bank in exchange for normalisation of relations, he has made it clear that this is a temporary measure. In any case, the U.S. has insisted that the timing of the annexation must be subject to Washington's concurrence, which it is withholding for the moment. Moreover, Joe Biden, the Democratic presidential candidate who is presently leading the polls, has made clear his opposition to annexation, thus acting as a further deterrent for Mr. Netanyahu's plan. The temporary suspension of his annexation plan is a concession not to the Crown Prince of UAE but one that has been forced on Mr. Netanyahu temporarily by American policy. But, he has made it clear that he has merely postponed the plan, not abjured it completely. In the long run, Israel is likely to have its cake and eat it too. Incidentally, the Palestinians haven't lost anything because the occupied West Bank has already been annexed in all but in name.

The Hindu In Focus podcast | [How the Israel-UAE peace agreement changes the game in the Middle East](#)

The agreement does not change the strategic map of West Asia. Abu Dhabi's open embrace of Israel is driven by the fact that the UAE and most other members of the GCC look upon Israel as their "protector" against Iran now that they are unsure if the U.S., in its current retrenchment mode, will come to their aid in case of a showdown with Tehran. But this is a well-known fact. The deal merely lays bare the UAE's and the GCC's primary motive for courting Israel.

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