

## UAE-ISRAELI BREAKTHROUGH MUST BE SEEN IN THE CONTEXT OF MOVES TO CONTAIN IRAN

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

The August 13 announcement that the United Arab Emirates and Israel would begin the process of fully normalising their relations is a significant blow to the geostrategic position of the Islamic Republic of Iran in the region. How the agreement impacts the Iranian political and strategic positioning in Yemen, Syria and Lebanon will, however, be determined by the broader context in which it plays out in the coming year.

Though the normalisation agreement between the UAE and Israel has elicited a frenzy of media coverage, its impact on Iranian politics will depend on two other factors, which are the result of the presidential election in the [United States](#) and the outcome of Benjamin Netanyahu's corruption trial. Undoubtedly, other Gulf and Arab candidates are waiting to follow the UAE in normalising relations with Israel. Each country has specific strategic calculations for being willing to consider such a step, but altogether their anxiety about Iran as a hegemonic power with a nuclear bomb is singularly intense.

Oman and Bahrain may be further along the path of normalisation with Israel than Saudi Arabia. It is highly doubtful that King Salman bin Abdulaziz would take such a step while he remains on the throne. Beyond the Arab countries of the Persian Gulf, Sudan has clear reasons for developing formal ties with Israel. The Sudanese-Israeli dialogue will certainly take place, because, since the February 2019 ouster of former President Omar al-Bashir, the new Sudanese government led by Abdel Fattah al-Burhan has shown interest in having political and economic relations with the United States, while trying to move into the regional orbit of the UAE. In addition to solidifying its partnership with Israel, Khartoum would be hoping to finally be removed from the US Department of State's list of state sponsors of terrorism. Many of the new political and strategic partners of Israel share a deep distrust of Iran among themselves. And with many other Middle Eastern and North African countries, they are also keen on building strong ties with the Trump administration.

By building close political and military links with the US and Israel, these Islamic countries are hoping to keep at bay an ideological power such as Iran and its Shiite and Sunni proxies. Let us not forget that Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei had heavily criticised the Emirati government for normalising relations with Israel. The Ayatollah said: "The UAE committed treason against the Islamic world, the regional nations and Palestine." Ayatollah Khamenei's attitude is understandable when we know that the UAE-Israeli deal has, by and large, put an end to the rapprochement of Iran with any of the Persian Gulf Emirates, especially on two issues — the war in Yemen and the key Iranian foreign policy tenet of refusal to recognise Israel.

Iran, however, continues to pursue an ideologically determined, universalist foreign policy in the region. Also, with the Iranian Revolutionary Guards (IRGC) in total charge, it is unlikely that Iran will alter its uncompromising position regarding the question of Israeli statehood. As a result, with Israel's new normalisation with some Arab governments, and with key Persian Gulf states maintaining their hostility towards Iran, no one is rushing to support Tehran. Meanwhile, a failed economy, alongside socially and politically conservative measures and the use of extreme violence during the turmoil of November 2019, have led to the flight of people and capital from Iran. Unfortunately, the financial and economic strangulation of Iran by American sanctions is not helping either. If things continue in the same vein, Iran will be heading directly towards a

major social and political crisis.

Yet, despite all the regional and international pressures on the Islamic Republic of Iran, the IRGC is preparing to win the upcoming presidential elections in Iran in 2021. This simply means a return to a more zealous commitment to regional militancy and militarisation, which would be unacceptable in the eyes of the Arab Emirs of the Persian Gulf, Israel and the US. It goes without saying that while the Iranian ultra-conservatives are hoping to consolidate their domestic and regional powers, Israel and its new friends will be thinking in terms of containing Iran.

The danger, of course, is that these provocations could escalate into an all-out war between Iran and Israel, which both countries are trying to avoid. But the likelihood of war will continue to increase if either Netanyahu or Trump sees a political opportunity in confronting the Iranian regime. It is doubtful that such a confrontation would actually help Trump to win the next presidential elections in the US or to save Netanyahu from his corruption trial. But unfortunately, nobody can rule out the possibility of relations worsening in the Middle East.

***This article first appeared in the print edition on September 8, 2020 under the title 'Degrees of distrust'. The writer is Noor-York Chair in Islamic Studies, York University, Toronto and professor-vice dean and director, [Mahatma Gandhi](#) Centre for Peace, Jindal Global University***

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