

WHAT'S NEXT FOR PALESTINE AFTER UAE, BAHRAIN DEALS WITH ISRAEL?

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No quick fix:Palestinians carrying placards to protest against the normalisation of Israel-Bahrain ties.AFPMAHMUD HAMS

It took more than three decades for the first Arab country to recognise Israel. Egypt signed a peace treaty with its Jewish neighbour in 1979, a year after the Camp David summit between President Anwar Sadat and Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin. Jordan, the second Arab country that established peace with Israel, took 15 more years to do so. There was a gap of 26 years between Jordan's peace treaty and that of the UAE with Israel. And then, it took less than 30 days for the fourth agreement — between Bahrain and Israel that was announced on Friday by U.S. President Donald Trump.

Arab Peace Initiative

The new-found readiness of Arab countries to have peace with Israel, under the mediation of the Trump administration, appears to be transforming one of the oldest conflicts in modern West Asia. There are speculations that more Arab countries, from Morocco to Sudan and Oman, might follow the footsteps of the UAE and Bahrain. These deals, which have formalised years of back-room contacts between the Gulf kingdoms and Israel, suggest that the pan-Arab-Israel conflict is turning the page. Where does it leave the Palestinians?

Till the UAE-Israel deal was announced on August 13, the official Arab position on the question of Palestine was rooted in the Arab Peace Initiative, proposed by Saudi Arabia in 2002, and endorsed by the Arab League in the same year. The proposal calls for normalising relations between the Arab world and Israel, in exchange for full Israeli withdrawal from the territories it captured in the 1967 war, including the West Bank, Gaza and the Golan Heights, a “just settlement” of the Palestinian refugee issue and the establishment of an independent Palestinian state with East Jerusalem as its capital.

“Since 2002, both the UAE and Bahrain have supported the Arab Peace Initiative. However, the recent agreements made by Bahrain and the UAE break with this consensus. The Abraham Accords [Israel-UAE deal] require Israel only to ‘temporarily halt’ its formal annexation of the West Bank [settlements]. The agreement between Bahrain and Israel dispenses with the pretence altogether, making no mention of Palestinian land,” said Elham Fakhro, senior Gulf analyst at the Brussels-based International Crisis Group (ICG).

This has angered the Palestinians, who have “strongly rejected” the agreements. “The Palestinian leadership considers this step to blow up the Arab Peace Initiative and the decisions of the Arab and Islamic summits, and international legitimacy, as an aggression against the Palestinian people, and as neglecting Palestinian rights and sacred things, especially Jerusalem and the independent Palestinian state on the borders of June 4, 1967,” the Palestinian leadership said in a statement issued after the UAE deal was announced.

The Palestinians have further called for “an immediate emergency session” of the Arab League and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation “to reject this declaration”.

The Palestinians Liberation Organization (PLO) has rejected the Bahrain-Israel deal as well. “If you really wish to ‘advance the cause of peace, dignity, & economic opportunity for the Palestinian people’ how about ending Israel’s ruthless occupation and its theft of our land and resources? Coercing and cajoling Arabs to normalise with Israel will not bring you peace or dignity,” tweeted Hanan Ashrawi, a member of the PLO Executive Committee, after the Bahrain agreement was announced.

‘Bleak future’

The Palestinians got nothing in return from these agreements, said A.K. Pasha, a professor of West Asian Studies at Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi. “[Former Egyptian President Anwar] Sadat wanted an autonomous West Bank and Gaza and removal of the settlements [in 1978-79], but he could get only a freeze on the settlements for three months. The same scenario is now being repeated. The Israelis say they have postponed the annexation. After the U.S. election, whether Trump wins or not, [Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin] Netanyahu will go ahead with his annexation plan,” he told *The Hindu* , adding that the future of the Palestinians “looks quite bleak”.

Agrees Ms. Fakhro of the ICG. “By normalising relations outside this framework of ‘land for peace’, the two states have broken with a decades-old Arab consensus on the Palestinian issue, and effectively endorsed Israel’s military occupation over the Palestinians. This leaves the Palestinians more isolated than ever, and further weakens the already-dim prospect of a two-state solution,” Ms. Fakhro told *The Hindu* . “For the Palestinians, solidarity will need to be recast in broader terms, knowing full well that many Arab states — but not their unrepresented populations — have all but abandoned the Palestinian cause.”

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