

The new Middle Eastern normal



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On 15 September 2020, a joint peace deal was signed between the State of Israel, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain and the United States, known as the Abraham Accords Peace Agreement – which concern a treaty of peace and a full normalisation of the diplomatic relations between the United Emirates and Israel.

The United Arab Emirates stands as the first Persian Gulf state to normalise relations with Israel, and the third Arab state, after Egypt in 1979 and Jordan in 1994. What does this mean for the Middle East? Will the issue of Palestinian statehood turn totally marginal? How will the team of US President Joe Biden reconcile the Trump legacy with its own Middle East strategy? A stocktaking of the historic patterns and today's volatility.

For years, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has been promoting the idea of talking to Sunni monarchies. Commercial sections and contacts in scientific research had prepared the ground. When Yossi Cohen became head of the Mossad in 2016, he was trusted with such a diplomatic offensive. It might sound anecdotal but Cohen was, inter alia, busy convincing the Emir of Qatar, traditional supporter of the Muslim Brotherhood, to continue funding the Palestinian Hamas in Gaza. The reasoning from an Israeli point of view is: better Hamas controls Gaza and does not run out of money. The risky alternative would be social implosion and the rise of militias franchised by the Islamic State (Daesh). Cohen is the real architect of this expanding list of Israel's new Arab partners.

Changing the pattern

An interesting feature of Israeli foreign policy used to be the following: build alliances with Non-Arab Muslims respectively with Non-Muslim Arabs. Turkey was such a strategic partner for decades, the cooperation with Iran was very profound until the revolution in 1979. The plot for the Lebanon war of 1982 was to establish institutional ties with the Maronite Christians in Beirut. Had the Israelis not antagonised the Shiites of Lebanon, it might have happened. But Hezbollah emerged as the real winner of that invasion and the Palestinians fighters had to quit. Furthermore, Israel made use of the various desperate Kurdish groups from Iraq to Syria for its regional purposes. The Wahhabite Kingdom of Saudi Arabia used to see it itself as the special supervisor for all sorts of religious and political agendas in the Middle East, there-

by putting the Palestinian questions at its center. Things have changed over the past five decades.

Perceiving Iran as the "real" threat has become the common denominator of regional cooperation for a wide range of Arab countries alongside with Israel. Subsequently to the Iraq invasion by the USA and her allies in 2003, Iran rose to an influential regional power with nuclear ambitions. The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) of 14 July 2015 is an arms control document to monitor the nuclear programme of Tehran and it should have opened a new chapter for Iran. Though the sanctions by the UN Security Council were lifted, real investments never started. Banks were afraid of US pressure and refrained from financing projects by western companies in Iran. When the US government announced its withdrawal from the JCPOA on 9 May 2018, the dices were thrown up into the air.

Will Biden revitalise the JCPOA or will the USA opt for a broader agreement that goes beyond disarmament and comprise also Iran's regional role? The latter is rejected by Iran and would put into jeopardy the legal principle of "pacta sunt servanda", treaties have to be preserved. As foreign minister, I reiterated this topic and the urgency for the respect of international law. It seems that the new administration might rebalance its relations with Israel and some of the Arab Gulf states, notably Saudi Arabia, which enjoyed a quasi-unconditional support by Washington for the past four years.

Talking to Iran and stopping arms sales to Saudi Arabia

The new Biden team has been fairly active in the first weeks of taking office: it imposed a temporary freeze on US arms sales to Saudi Arabia and is reviewing purchases by the United Arab Emirates. Billions of US-Dollars in weapons transactions are at stake. Washington wishes to ensure that American weapons are not used for the Saudi-led military campaign in Yemen, which started in March 2015. The Yemen war has turned into the biggest humanitarian disaster ever since.

This review includes the sale of precision-guided

munitions to Riyadh as well as F-35 fighters to Abu Dhabi, a contract that Washington approved as part of the Abraham Accords. In the end, this sale will most probably go ahead, but a new era has begun in DC with more scrutinising the political agenda in the Arab Gulf States.

In parallel, being on speaking terms with Tehran is certainly one of the priorities of new chief diplomat Antony Blinken. The mantra of "maximum pressure" on Iran orchestrated by his predecessor Mike Pompeo until his very last moment in office, has been abandoned.

Where will Israel position itself on the chessboard? New doors were opened – the rather easy ones are those leading into the Gulf and to the Kingdom of Morocco, which the Gulf Cooperation Council always wanted to have on board, though its geography is the Western Mediterranean, not the Persian Gulf. The new era with Sudan might prove more difficult, for the country is in a profound transition and torn between different concepts of Islam. Still pending is the Palestine Question. Ever since the UN partition plan of 1947, the idea of Palestinian statehood has been postponed by Israeli accomplished facts, such as wars, settlements, and continuous annexation. Rumors have not stopped that Abu Dhabi engaged in these diplomatic ties to preempt the complete annexation of the West Bank as announced by Netanyahu in one of his many recent election campaigns.

Peace or Truce

During my studies at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, I attended a seminar in which we analysed the notion of peace as opposed to truce regarding the Camp David Treaty of 1979 which ended the state of war between Israel and Egypt. Before embarking on his historic journey to Israel, then Egyptian President Anwar el-Sadat asked for an advisory opinion by Islamic legal scholars to obtain legitimacy for his step. Historic references dating back to the Prophet's actions were found. The concept of a "temporary truce" rather than a "definite peace" agreement was advanced. The Camp David accord was heeded with huge applause and Nobel Peace Awards, alas the "peace" remained cold. Or was it just a truce? Lots of setbacks followed, during the Arab revolt ten years ago, Netanyahu proved to remain the more solid ally of Egypt's President Hosni Mubarak. The fact that the most important Arab US partner was swiftly abandoned by the Obama government provoked deep mistrust, in particular for Israel and Saudi Arabia. Ever since, they got closer. But diplomatic ties between the Saudis and Israelis are not to be the next surprise, in my estimate. Netanyahu apparently met Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman. But the Saudi tribe is the custodian of the Holy Islamic shrines, which the Hashemite – as direct descendants of the prophet – used to be for centuries. Riyadh will not simply be another diplomatic conquest.

On 15 September 2020, then US President Donald J. Trump (2nd right), Minister of Foreign Affairs of Bahrain Abdullatif bin Rashid Al-Zayani (left), Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu (2nd left) and Minister of Foreign Affairs for the United Arab Emirates Abdullah bin Zayed Al Nahyan (right) signed the Abraham Accords on the South Lawn of the White House.



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