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THE CURRENT: What prompted the UAE and Bahrain's normalization of relations with Israel?

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PITA: You're listening to The Current, part of the Brookings Podcast Network. I'm your host, Adrianna Pita.

On Tuesday, leaders from Israel, the United Arab Emirates, and Bahrain met at the White House to sign what are being called the Abraham Accords, normalizing relationships between the three countries. With us to explain what this agreement means for those involved countries, and particularly for the Palestinians, is Natan Sachs, a fellow and director of the Center for Middle East policy here at Brookings. Natan, thanks for talking to us today.

SACHS: Thanks so much, Adrianna. It's my pleasure.

PITA: I'm wondering if you can start us off with sort of a quick definitional ruling. There are some folks, including the White House, referring to this as a peace deal, others are calling this more a mere formalization of practical cooperative relationships that have existed for a little while now. What should we think about this agreement?

SACHS: It's a bit of both. On the one hand, these are countries that never actually fought. There was not a state of war between the UAE or Bahrain and Israel, unlike many other Arab countries. They're simply quite far apart and the UAE never sent an expeditionary force to fight Israel. So, in that sense, it's a formal normalization of relations between two countries. But first, the accords are defined by the signatories as a peace deal and, secondly, they are much more than just formalizing what already existed. Now, not only the governments will cooperate on security and intelligence, although pretending not to, now, you will have embassies, direct flights, open relations, commercial relations, tourism. The countries, moreover, seem to actually be enthusiastic about it, which is very different than Israel's relations with some other countries who are sort of very shy about it. Here we have much more than just formalization, although peace and comparing this to the peace between Israel and Egypt or Jordan, that's certainly a stretch.

PITA: What led this agreement to occur now? What led these three countries to reach this agreement at this time?

SACHS: It's a great question. There's sort of a combination of two things going on. One is a long-term trajectory and the other is sort of the impetus right this summer. Long-term trajectory is that these countries, and not just them, find themselves on the same side of more than one fissure in the Middle

East. They both find themselves in the anti-Iran camp, along especially with Saudi Arabia, which has not yet formalized any relations with Israel, but does have quite a bit of ties. They are also in some opposition to the more Muslim Brotherhood-friendly camp in the Middle East, and especially Turkey and Qatar. Although there the animosity for Israel at least, certainly not as severe, it has relations with Turkey and nonformal relations with Qatar as well.

So that's the backdrop. They both have the same kind of interests and the Arab states, moreover, have grown increasingly weary of the Palestinian issue and frustrated with the Palestinian leadership, feeling that they have been held hostage by the Palestinians for a long time in pursuing their own interests, which are closer relations with a powerful and economically vibrant country like Israel and, by extension, certain degrees of relations with the United States, too. More immediately, Israel has gone through a long political crisis with three elections in one year, and in the context of those domestic campaigns, Prime Minister Netanyahu raised the possibility of annexing portions of the West Bank formally into Israel. That got a big push with the publication of the Trump quote unquote "peace plan" and that plan called for Israel to retain very large parts of the West Bank, including all the Jordan Valley, and there was equivocation from the American administration about whether Israel could actually annex this territory before any peace was putatively reached for the Palestinians. The ambassador in Israel suggested yes. The White House seem to put the brakes on it. The UAE came in and first it campaigned in Israel. In fact, the ambassador in Washington wrote an op-ed in Hebrew, calling on Israel not to annex, saying that already, there's quite a bit of normalization. That Israel had to choose either annexation or nominal normalization. Building on that, the Americans and the Israelis got the UAE, in particular, to agree to actually formalize this peace or this normalization in return for Israel shelving the idea of annexing parts of the West Bank, at least, it seems, for three or four years, which may be for eternity, especially if Trump is out of office by then, which we of course don't know yet.

PITA: Yeah, it's usually hard to say that there's any bad side to any kind of a peace deal, but the Palestinians, really seem to be sort of left out. What can you tell us about how they are reacting to this, about how they are affected by this? What does this normalization mean for them?

SACHS: Well, the postponement of annexation, the Palestinians referred to it as a fig leaf, as simply the UAE giving an excuse as to why they have not betrayed the Palestinians, when in fact they have normalized relations with Israel without waiting for full peace between Israel and the Palestinians without an end of occupation, etc, etc. And in this sense, they circumvented, to a degree, the Arab Peace Initiative -- the peace initiative adopted by the Arab League; it was originally the Saudi proposal -- said that Israel could have full normalized relations with the whole Arab world if it withdrew from all the territory the Palestinians claim and all the territory the Syrians claim and achieve peace deals with those two parties, the Palestinians and the Syrians. This of course now means normalization before any such deal or withdrawal by the Israelis and in that sense the Palestinians feel deeply betrayed. This is extremely unpopular among Palestinians, they feel that this is a betrayal, I think, is really the only word one can use. They have, in fact, recalled their ambassadors to the two countries. And so, in that sense, they are the clear losers. It's hard to call a peace deal a bad thing, and I don't think one should. I think this is a certainly a net positive. Normal relations between two countries should not be beholden to other things, in general. But it certainly does have downsides, without question.

Palestinians in the context of the Trump team's efforts on the Palestinian-Israeli portfolio have been shunted aside, have come out dramatically weaker than they were before, and is now left by the side, even by some of their erstwhile allies. So, in that sense, it certainly makes Palestinians much weaker. It signals – the Israelis hope and think – that it signals to the Palestinians that they cannot simply assume the world will wait for them. I think there's some truth to that. The Palestinians assumed too much about the patience of the Arab world or others, but it of course has an enormous danger which is that Israel can now ignore the Palestinian issue, or think it can ignore the Palestinian issue, much more readily, when in fact the Emiratis perhaps can ignore the Palestinian issue – they are thousands of kilometers away. Israel cannot. The Palestinians are right there and they're not disappearing just because the Emiratis signed a peace accord.

PITA: The Emiratis and Bahrain, as you said, they have their own interests in pursuing this at this time. Is it cynical to ask how much Israel's own internal domestic political concerns are weighing in on either the timing or what they get out of this relationship? Not to mention the U.S.?

SACHS: Certainly, the US is an important point. The timing of these ceremonies and their location and their pomp and circumstance all throughout the COVID pandemic, all that is not coincidentally before November 3. This is clearly an attempt by President Trump and his team to portray international success ahead of the American elections. For Israel, it's rather simpler. You know, sometimes, sometimes we make things more complicated than they are. Israel in its 70-some years has been aching for recognition by the Arab world and for acceptance. It especially hopes to get that while giving up as little as possible, with the Palestinians and others. And here comes a peace agreement with two Arab countries. It's something that is extremely popular in Israel by opposition and coalition alike. There is some debate about it, about the Palestinian aspect of it. But by and large, this is very popular.

There is an important aspect here, which is that the Emiratis, perhaps the Bahrainis but more importantly the Emiratis, are getting a lot of goodies, especially from the United States. They will probably be approved for purchase of F-35s, or at least the administration will push for that. Congress has to approve. The F-35 is a very advanced weapons platform and in American law, in fact, there is guarantee that the U.S. via Congress will guarantee Israel's qualitative military edge. So, although Israel has no veto, the Congress is actually mandated but also desires to take into account Israel's qualitative military edge in the region, as it's called. In that regard, the Israeli position is very important. Prime Minister Netanyahu claims he did not approve or did not consent to the sale. But it seems that he did or it seems certainly that the administration understands that he did, which is the same thing, and in that regard, the Emiratis are getting quite a bit. Over that there is some debate in Israel. Netanyahu did this whole deal without including almost anyone else, including his foreign minister and his defense minister. They both happened to be political rivals in the Israeli system. And that also includes the question of the F-35s, where of course the defense minister is very important. On that, and the context of other scandals in Israel, there, there is some debate. Over peace in general with Arab countries, there isn't much. It's extremely popular in Israel.

PITA: And lastly, looking ahead from here, where else is this likely to go? Is Israel likely to be pursuing normalization with any other countries, or are Bahrain and the UAE sort of outliers in their distance, and, as you said, their previous lack of any direct conflict with Israel?

SACHS: Israel and the U.S. are certainly pursuing normalization with as many countries as possible. This is not new. Israel would like recognition by the Arab world. The question where it becomes tricky for Israel is where there is territory to give back. So, most of the Palestinians and putatively with Syria, if there ever was again a Syria to negotiate seriously. With other countries Israel would simply like relations, and America is working hard at that. There are hints and President Trump spoke of five or six other countries, we don't know if that number is serious, but there are certainly other candidates. The big one, the big question would be Saudi Arabia. It has had clandestine relations with Israel, extensive ones. Everything I said about the Emirates, or most of it, applies to Saudi Arabia. The animosity towards Iran is certainly greater in Saudi Arabia than it is in the UAE, and in that regard, Saudi Arabia would be a very important question. However, Saudi Arabia also has a sizable population. And Israel remains unpopular in many quarters in the Arab world, although not as [un]popular as it used to be. In that regard, the freedom of operation that the ruling families in the UAE or Bahrain or elsewhere have does not necessarily exist in all the countries, especially ones with bigger populations. Still, Bahrain does answer somewhat to Riyadh, and so if Bahrain did it, we could assume that Riyadh is willing to contemplate it, at least. Saudi Arabia also agreed for overflight permissions for Israeli flights and other flights going between the UAE and Israel. That's a very big deal for Israel, it cuts flight time for Israel, not just to the UAE, but to Asia, East Asia, in general. That's a very important step. And so, we might expect, Saudi Arabia, although we don't know. That's a hard thing for them to do. Oman has been mentioned. Morocco has always had semi-warm donations over the years, and that could happen. There's a very sizable Moroccan-Jewish population in Israel, Israelis of Moroccan descent. So, there's certainly could be other countries. The major questions, though, are those with major conflict with Israel, particularly Palestinians, Syria, if it was ever reconstituted. This, despite words to the contrary, is not only not in the cards, it's less than the cards today than it was before the signing, I'm afraid.

PITA: All right, Natan. Thanks very much for talking to us today about this.

SACHS: My pleasure. Thank you, Adrianna.