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Relations Between Israel and the UAE and Bahrain: Five Years to the Abraham Accords, Two Years to October 7

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On September 15, the fifth anniversary of the Abraham Accords between Israel, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and Bahrain – which had seemed to herald a regional dynamic of cooperation – was quietly observed. October 7 marked the second anniversary of Hamas's surprise attack on Israel. This event led to the re-insertion of the Palestinian issue at the center of world politics, a bloody war in Gaza, dramatic shifts in regional balance of power, and steep decline in Israel's international and regional status.

This paper examines the state of relations between the UAE, Bahrain, and Israel, five years into the Abraham Accords and two years into the regional crisis ignited on October 7, 2023. While the formal relations established five years ago, and the security, economic, and other ties which accompanied them, have been severely stressed, they have endured.

This analysis is based largely on face-to-face and remote conversations with a wide network of Emirati and Bahraini analysts and academics, as well as Gulf-based Western diplomats and analysts. They are not identified due to the critical nature of their comments and the sensitivity of the issues in the Gulf states.¹

¹ Ten of the conversations (including one with multiple participants) were in Abu Dhabi, Dubai and

Short Honeymoon

The process of normalization was not tension-free between September 2020 and October 2023. A series of attempts (but not all) by the UAE to secure major investments in Israel were thwarted by Israeli regulators and public opposition. Israeli policy and actions in the West Bank and in Jerusalem – especially regarding the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif, which were seen as undermining the “tolerance narrative” of the Accords – were a tender point. This was especially true after, the swearing-in of the most right-wing government in Israel’s history under Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in December 2022. The Negev Summit between the foreign ministers of Israel, [Bahrain](#), [Egypt](#), [Morocco](#), the [United Arab Emirates](#) and the U.S., held in March 2022 and was to be an annual event, was postponed in May 2023 and has not reconvened. Already before October 2023, it was noted that Prime Minister Netanyahu, unlike prime ministers Bennett and Lapid (during whose short period in power, June 2021-December 2022, relations were good), hadn’t been invited to visit the UAE or Bahrain. However, over the past three years, military contacts and cooperation among these countries and others, continued apace.²

After October 7

After October 7, more challenges emerged. While the two states did not display support for Hamas, both governments and populations in the UAE and Bahrain demonstrate significant solidarity with the suffering of Gazans, and the Palestinian cause more generally. Both regimes had publicly justified the Accords by arguing that engagement with Israel would help them help the Palestinians: the Emiratis claimed the Accords had neutralized the threat of Israeli annexation in the West Bank. In addition, the UAE provided \$2.27 billion worth of humanitarian assistance in Gaza, including airdrops of supplies, setting up field hospitals, evacuating

Manama in late July 2025; four others were carried out on Zoom in October 2025.

² David Kenner, “[Arab states expanded cooperation with Israeli military during Gaza war, files show](#),” *Washington Post*, October 2, 2025.

wounded for treatment, and desalinization plants.³ Analysts in the UAE and Bahrain noted huge frustration with the current Israeli government and claimed that it takes its Gulf allies for granted. In the words of one senior Emirati researcher, “Israel acts as if the Abraham Accords are not important to it: Israel is not willing to pay its dues to the partnership [in terms of refraining from problematical policies and statements and taking Gulf interests into account] ... so we have to reexamine.”⁴

While neither country has democratic institutions, both pay significant attention to public opinion. While Emiratis acquiesce to their government’s policy of normalization, the majority are uninterested personally in normalization with Israel or Israelis; this tendency has reportedly increased markedly since the war’s outbreak. Individuals and businesses have chosen not to develop relationships with Israel and Israelis, due both to their personal identification with Palestinian suffering and to reputational concerns.

In Bahrain, where political views are more diverse and expressed more than in the UAE (in the words of one Western diplomat, “there is a real street”), the decision to normalize was never significantly explained or “marketed” to the public. There is disappointment with the lack of significant economic benefits (and little public discussion of substantial military and security benefits which accrued to Bahrain). In addition, very few Israelis have visited Bahrain, so an Israeli presence was not felt. As several Bahraini experts noted to me, “normalization is shallow, and its roots so can be easily pulled out.” One Bahraini expert assessed to me, “before Oct. 7, 85 percent were against normalization with Israel [largely borne out by a Washington Institute for Near East Policy poll from May 2023 which showed 20 percent of Bahrainis thought the Abraham Accords would have a positive effect on the region]⁵: the other 15 percent supported it because the government said so.

³ Huda Ata, “[UAE delivers \\$2.57 billion-worth humanitarian aid to Gaza](#),” *Gulf News*, November 2, 2025.

⁴ Personal conversation with author, July 2025.

⁵ David Pollock, [New Bahrain Poll Reveals Support for Russia, Entente with Iran, Split on Israel](#).

Today, after a big push by both Sunni and Shi'i religious figures, the opposition to the normalization is 95 percent."⁶

Before The Israeli Attack in Doha

Tensions flared regarding Prime Minister Netanyahu's recent (August-October 2025) flirtation with partial annexation of areas in the West Bank. This led to discreet, then public, warnings by the Emirati government that such a move would seriously impact the Abraham Accords. Lana Nusseibah, Special Envoy and Former UN Ambassador, noted that annexation would be "a red line for my government, and that means there can be no lasting peace. It would foreclose the idea of regional integration and be the death knell of the two-state solution." She also said that "annexation by Israel of Palestinian land, if pursued, would not only close the door to peace and integration, it would betray the very spirit of the Abraham Accords ... For the UAE, this is not a matter of politics alone. It is a matter of principle, and it is a matter of peace for our region."⁷ Emirati and other Gulf state remonstrations led the Trump Administration to publicly state that it does not support annexation.⁸

It is poorly understood in Israel that preventing looming annexation was not only the public justification given by the UAE government in 2020 for Abraham Accords, but an actual one. Israelis tend to see UAE invoking the Palestinian issue as "window-dressing," without recognizing there is true concern for the Palestinian issue in government and public circles, especially since October 7. The resurgence

Washington Institute for Near East Policy (WINEP), Fikra Forum, May 3, 2023.

⁶ Personal conversations with author, July and October 2025.

⁷ Jacob Magid, "[UAE warns Israel: Annexing West Bank is a 'red line' that would 'end regional integration.'](#)" *Times of Israel*, September 3, 2025.

⁸ Isabel Kershner, "[Trump Says Israeli Annexation of West Bank Land 'Won't Happen'.](#)" *New York Times*, October 23, 2025.

of the annexation issue was seen as a clear indication of Israel's ignoring of the impact of its actions on the UAE in favor of narrow domestic considerations.

According to diplomats and analysts in the Gulf, there was satisfaction and admiration in some circles after the Israeli attacks on Hizballah and Iran, though the governments officially condemned the actions.⁹ The Iranian threat and capacity for mischief that has governed the security policy of Gulf states for decades has been objectively reduced, due to Israeli action, and the Axis of Resistance which joined Iran to its allies and proxies in Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, Gaza and Yemen, has mostly collapsed.

However, grave concern was expressed to me in a July 2025 trip to the Gulf after Israeli attacks on Syrian government targets (July 16-17) in response to violence against Druze civilians in Suweida. This was especially egregious, several analysts noted, as the Emirates were trying to shore up the new Syrian regime and fill a mediation role between it and Israel. One Emirati analyst told me that “Emiratis have learned to have a division of approach: unhappy with bombing of Syria but happy with bombing of Iran.”¹⁰ Many Gulf observers believe that Israel has displayed a clear preference for the use of force over diplomacy, and even hegemonic behavior, in its actions throughout the Middle East: Mohammed Baharoon, the head of B’huth, a Dubai research center, said: “now the madman with a gun is Israel, it’s not Iran.”¹¹

There is also concern, in the wake of the “12-Day War” between Israel and Iran (June 13-24), that too much military pressure could cause the Iranian regime to collapse or lose control or alternatively bring it to “build back better” its military and strategic capabilities: Both developments would have serious destabilizing effects in the Gulf. Marwan Al-Bloushi, of the Emirates Policy Center, wrote: “Iran may

⁹ Personal conversations with author, July and October 2025.

¹⁰ Personal conversations with author, July 2025.

¹¹ Quoted in Vivian Nereim, “[In Attacking Iran, Israel Further Alienates Would-Be Arab Allies,](#)” *New York Times*, June 18, 2025.

recalibrate its military tactics – shifting away from targeting Israel's advanced defense infrastructure, which offer limited prospects for success ... Instead, Tehran could redirect its attention toward its Gulf neighbors, targeting critical infrastructure and vulnerable assets that underpin global energy markets and economic stability.”¹²

Hasan Alhasan (a Bahraini) and Emile Hokayem of the International Institute for Strategic Studies in August expressed their concern that Israel may feel further emboldened to resort to unprovoked military attacks rather than diplomacy, a state of affairs that almost all countries in the region would regard as a recipe for permanent instability.¹³ In July, one very knowledgeable Gulf analyst shared his view that Israel has a “newfound sense of superiority and enhanced deterrence, and a sense of strength.” “It feels free to bully,” and acts like a “regional highwayman.” The worrisome pattern of Israeli aggression he sees is due, in his estimation, to the fact that an influential, far-right segment of society is “drunk on power.”¹⁴ Strong stress is put in the Gulf on the positions and statements of the Israeli far-right, and overestimation of their electoral strength is rife.

Another analyst claims there is widespread elite discussion of “what is the foundation of relations between UAE and Israel?” and of the need to examine how sustainable the relationship is. They see a clash between perceptions of security: the UAE’s is based on collaboration, while Israel’s is based on prevention. Another Gulf-based researcher told me, regarding the June attacks: “UAE and other Gulf states have levers to control Iranian actions, but not to control Israel and the U.S.” A senior Western diplomat in the Gulf noted to me in July that “Arab states see themselves as potentially emasculated by an Israeli superpower.”¹⁵

¹² Marwan Al-Bloushi, “[GCC and the Israel-Iran Confrontation: Analyzing Initial Reactions](#),” *Emirates Policy Center*, July 1, 2025.

¹³ Hasan T. Alhasan and Emile Hokayem, “[The Middle East’s New Intermediaries: Can the Gulf States Broker Peace Between America, Iran, and Israel](#),” *Foreign Affairs*, August 4, 2025

¹⁴ Personal conversations with author, July 2025.

¹⁵ Personal conversations with author, July 2025.

After the Israeli Attack in Doha

The strike in Doha, Qatar (September 9) supercharged these critical perspectives on Israeli behavior, and began leading Gulf leaders and analysts to far-ranging changes in their view of Israel's position and role, and of the American commitment to their defense. Rather than being quietly pleased, as was apparently assumed by some Israeli policymakers, the GCC was horrified that Israel would attack a "sister" Gulf country. Gulf expert Hussein Ibish noted that "it illustrated how easily any of them can be suddenly attacked by more powerful neighbors, including Israel, Turkey, and especially Iran ... This helps to explain why Gulf countries felt that the attack against Qatar threatened all of them equally, political and ideological differences of the past notwithstanding."¹⁶

The Gulf states see their security, and their identity, as interlinked. As one Bahraini expert noted to me after the Qatar strike: "We are all Khaleeji [meaning "from the Arabian Gulf"] and this a real identity. I can fight my brother, that's okay. But if my cousin gets involved, we'll both punch him." Many of my interlocutors noted this was the first overt military attack by Israel in a Gulf state, and therefore broke a taboo: who could be next? They also noted that the Israeli strike killed a Qatari policeman, meaning a "Khaleeji" was killed directly by Israel. Some noted his affiliation to Al-Dawasir, an influential tribe prominent across the Gulf, which potentially introduces an element of "blood feud."¹⁷ "For Gulf citizens, whether Bahraini, Emirati, or others, such an incident carries deep emotional and symbolic weight. Gulf ties are stronger than often appreciated, rooted in a shared Khaleeji identity that unites people across borders ... For Israel, these actions create an even greater challenge in winning hearts and minds across the region," noted one moderate Bahraini civil society group.¹⁸

Some Emirati and Bahraini analysts noted a degree of schadenfreude for Qatar, who had "played with fire [Hamas] and got burned ... it served them right." One

¹⁶ Hussein Ibish, "[Israel's Attack on Qatar Forces a Gulf Strategic Realignment](#)," Arab Gulf States Institute (AGSI), September 24, 2025.

¹⁷ Personal conversations with author, July and October 2025.

¹⁸ "[The Abraham Accords: Challenges & the Road Ahead](#)," *Citizens for Bahrain*, September 16, 2025.

Bahraini expert noted that “some people said the Abraham Accords were a good thing, since Israel would not do such activities in countries with which it had a peace treaty.”¹⁹ He noted that the June 23 Iranian attack on Qatar was viewed with much more alarm in Bahrain, which is extremely concerned about the precedent of direct Iranian attack on a Gulf state. After the Qatar strike, one UAE-based analyst noted that “UAE is the biggest supporter of Gaza, but Qatar is taking center stage... UAE gets all the blame and Qatar gets all the praise.”²⁰ It is clear after the presentation of the Trump plan to end the conflict in Gaza, that the UAE (and Saudi Arabia) are unhappy with the large role afforded in it by the American administration to Qatar and Turkey.

A widespread concern is that connection in international perceptions of the Gulf to the chaos and violence of the wider Middle East, as well as perceived threats to air travel, could well threaten the image of stability of the Gulf states, whose economic foundation relies on an image of wealth and safety. This could impact the attractiveness of the Gulf cities to tourists, international wealth migrants, real estate investors, and businesses. These states need stability to ensure their strategic interests of steady oil and gas production and exports, and continued and accelerated economic diversification.

However, the strike in the end rebounded, transforming the dynamics of the moribund Gaza ceasefire process, and significantly upgrading U.S.-Qatari relations, cementing Doha’s pivotal position. The day after the Israeli strike, UAE President Mohammed bin Zayed visited Doha, accompanied by his Defense and Interior Ministers and national security advisor. The UAE informed Israel that it had suspended Israeli companies’ participation in the Dubai air show in December.²¹

¹⁹ Personal conversation with author, October 2025.

²⁰ Personal conversations with author, July and October 2025.

²¹ Nava Freiberg, “[UAE bars Israel from Dubai Airshow; Jerusalem said to believe Qatar strike is the reason](#),” *Times of Israel*, September 10, 2025.

Two weeks after the attack on Qatar, on September 15, the defense ministers of the GCC met in extraordinary session in Doha. They condemned the “dangerous Israeli military attack” as “an unacceptable, aggressive escalation and a grave violation of international law.” They emphasized that “an attack on Qatar is an attack on all GCC states, posing a direct threat to the security and stability of the entire region.” The GCC Joint Defense Council then directed the Unified Military Command to increase the exchange of intelligence information; transmit the air situation to all GCC operation centers; accelerate the Early Warning System against Ballistic Missiles; update joint defense plans; and conduct joint air exercises over the next three months.²² It is still unclear what operational and strategic significance this has actually had.

What Next?

There is no real expectation that the UAE or Bahrain will formally suspend relations with Israel. One reason is the continued existence of significant national interests – security, technological, and economic – militating for such relations. It is worth noting, however, that the collapse of the Resistance Axis, and the détente in recent years between UAE and Iran, may make that strategic concern less pressing for Abu Dhabi.

In the broader regional context, questions abound regarding Israel’s future place in regional integration. Ideas and projects for regional connectivity abounded in recent years, impelled by the need for alternatives to the Red Sea route. The India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC) seems to still generate interest and support from the U.S., India, and most Gulf governments.²³ However, progress on some elements, especially ground transport links from the Gulf and Saudi Arabia through Jordan to Haifa, seems problematical, as political (and perhaps, due to their view of Israel as pursuing regional hegemony, geostrategic) costs of

²² GCC General Secretariat, “[Statement of the Extraordinary Session of the Joint Defence Council](#),” September 18, 2025.

²³ See, for example: “[Understanding IMEC: A pathway to connectivity amid global uncertainty](#),” Atlantic Council, August 28, 2025.

including Israel have increased: IMEC as first conceived largely hinges on Saudi-Israeli normalization. Syria can be an alternative to Israel in connectivity corridors and the conservative Arab states' improving relations with Turkey can also be changing the calculus previously militating for a central role for Israel.

Another factor militating against suspension of relations by the UAE and Bahrain is the unwillingness of Arab leaderships to admit mistakes. Perhaps the most important is the significant support the normalizations have garnered for the two states in the U.S. Congress. Any step to step back from the Abraham Accords would run the risk of harming relations with the U.S., especially with President Trump, for whom the Accords were the signal foreign policy achievement of his first term.

However, the question of whether and when the current “colder” phase of the relations – formal on paper, but increasingly hollow in practice²⁴ – will revert to the pre-2023 level, is very much open. Almost all of those interviewed assessed that their governments do not have high expectations from the current governing coalition in Israel. The governments assume that the current prime minister – whose brand, they opine, is fatally damaged in the Arab and Muslim world – will try to use any progress in relations for maximum electoral advantage and therefore afford priority to not shoring him up. The analysts widely share the assessment that significant re-starting of the bilateral relationships, and of the broader process of regional integration, will take some time and will be certainly follow elections in Israel. However, the renewed salience of the Palestinian issue for the Gulf states, and the lack of significant constituency in the near future in Israel for a two-state solution, may impose certain bounds even to relations with a successor government in Israel.

²⁴ Mahdi Ghuloom, “[*Israel's Strike on Qatar Tilts the Balance Against Gulf-Israel Relations*](#),” The Institute for Peace & Diplomacy, September 16, 2025.

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