

EDITORIAL



## From the Editors

IN EARLY 2021 Palestine and the Palestinians faced an unprecedented worsening in their already dire conditions. With considerable incentives from the outgoing administration of Donald Trump, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Bahrain, Morocco, and Sudan normalized relations with Israel, signing the so-called Abraham Accords. In doing so, none of these states offered any recognition of a century of dispossession, occupation, and ongoing ethnic cleansing in Palestine.

Israelis crowed about their now unlimited access to several more Arab countries without any reference to Palestine or the Palestinians. The Palestinians appeared more isolated and more alone than ever. Yet, in continuity with a long history of mass mobilization, starting in May 2021, Palestinians in Sheikh Jarrah and in Jerusalem, as well as in Gaza and inside the Green Line, launched the most comprehensive Palestinian uprising in decades. They made it clear that the Palestinian position on the ground, in the region, and internationally was a force to be reckoned with.

Autocratic, repressive, and unrepresentative Arab regimes nevertheless continued to curry favor with Washington and Israel while ignoring the issue of Palestine. Two of the countries concerned, Bahrain and Sudan, are arenas of a desperate, long-standing struggle between their peoples and their unpopular rulers. In both, the forces of counterrevolution and autocracy that reversed the democratic uprisings of the last decade were instrumental in leading these regimes to ally with Israel and abandon even lip service to Palestinian freedom. Bahrain's absolute monarchy and the Sudanese generals—the latter the perpetrators of genocide in Darfur—made these moves in the face of massive opposition by the people they rule. Polling by the Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies in Doha revealed that in 2019, only 13 percent of those polled in Sudan supported their country recognizing Israel, and only 4 percent in Morocco. In the aggregate, in the thirteen Arab countries surveyed, only 6 percent of those polled supported their countries doing the same.<sup>1</sup>

In some cases, the United States was instrumental in offering bribes to persuade Arab governments to take this step. Morocco, which has had long-standing covert and overt relations with Israel, received U.S. recognition of its annexation of the Western Sahara. In late November 2021, Rabat hosted Israeli “war minister” Benny Gantz (who, as army chief of staff, oversaw the slaughter of over twenty-five hundred Palestinians, most of them civilians, in the 2014 assault on Gaza<sup>2</sup>) for the signing of an unprecedented “memorandum of understanding that will outline defence cooperation between the two countries,” an accord that Israeli commentators indicated was significant “in the context of the Moroccan-Algerian tensions.”<sup>3</sup>

The Sudanese generals obtained removal of their country from the U.S. list of state supporters of terrorism and with it access to much-needed financing, as well as further backing in their ongoing struggle with the civilian members of an uneasy coalition government. Bahrain's rulers did as they were told by the autocratic Gulf regimes, whose military intervention in Bahrain in 2011 preserved those rulers' shaky hold on the throne. In part as a reward for normalization with Israel, the UAE finally obtained U.S. approval for (and removal of an Israeli veto from) the purchase of top-of-the-line F-35 stealth fighter jets.

In light of the UAE's already intimate covert alignment with Israel, it was unsurprising that the UAE was the most wholehearted in its embrace of normalization. Immediately after the accords were signed, Israeli tourists swarmed Dubai's hotels and beaches, and Israeli dates went on sale in UAE markets. But far from the sunscreen and the trade fairs, cooperation between the two countries on military surveillance and security technologies blossomed even further, and much more openly than ever before. This cooperation was already extensive, albeit discreet: a subsidiary of Raytheon based in Israel had covertly provided antimissile defenses to the UAE for many years. And Israeli surveillance technologies, which had been developed and refined to provide control over Palestinians under occupation, are employed by the repressive Emirati security services.<sup>4</sup>

With this tide of explicit recognition of Israel and wholesale abandonment of Palestine and the Palestinians, entirely new realms of military and security collaboration were now available. Israel's Elbit Systems opened a branch in Abu Dhabi in November 2021. The two countries have agreed to jointly design unmanned military vessels. The same month, major defense contractors Israel Aerospace Industries and Rafael Advanced Defense Systems displayed their lethal wares at the Dubai air show.<sup>5</sup> And in September 2021, Emirati and Bahraini ships joined in a Red Sea naval exercise with the Israeli and U.S. fleets. The commander of the Emirati air force attended a multilateral air exercise in Israel the following month, and Emirati planes continued their annual participation in joint air exercises in Greece together with the Israeli Air Force.<sup>6</sup> In Washington, the formidable lobbying clout of the UAE and Israel is now openly employed to serve their joint interests on Capitol Hill, in the executive branch, and in influential think tanks, while both lobbies sent out teams of attractive young people to sell "peace" accords (between countries that were never at war) to gullible American audiences.<sup>7</sup>

The defense and security establishments play an outsize role and absorb a massive share of the GDP (about 5 percent), in both Israel and the UAE. On the one hand is Israel: a nuclear weapons power for over half a century with a massive defense, security, and foreign policy establishment much older than the state itself,<sup>8</sup> which has won all of the wars it has fought with its neighbors and has long forcefully projected its power far beyond its borders. On the other is a state that until recently was entirely dependent on foreign powers to protect it, with one million citizens in a population of nearly ten million, but a GDP that is nearly double that of Israel's. While certainly useful to the Emirati monarchy domestically, regionally, and internationally, such an intimacy is especially beneficial to the Israeli objective of deep and unencumbered ties with countries throughout the Middle East.

Today, a wealthy and aggressive Arab state, which has been engaged in a devastating war in Yemen and direct intervention in Libya, is closely aligned with a power that has shaped itself through the conquest of Palestinian and Syrian land. Today, the Israeli economy has leveraged privileged access to investments from the UAE, which boasts a GDP of \$650 billion.<sup>9</sup> Israel and the UAE share an agenda of containing Iranian regional ambitions. The repeated attacks on Iran-linked targets in Syria, the covert operations against Iran's nuclear infrastructure and personnel, and Israel's much-publicized planning to attack Iran on a massive scale are no secret. Both states support repressive and antidemocratic regimes in Sudan and beyond.

What are the implications of this extravaganza of cooperation, collaboration and, in some cases, integration between these two states' defense and security establishments? While the benefits on the level of state and corporate interests will be lucrative, those who will pay the heaviest price for the wedding of autocracy and settler colonialism are the ordinary citizens

subject to their rule: the Palestinians, the Sudanese, the Syrians, the Lebanese, the Libyans, the Emiratis, and the legions of migrant workers who make life possible in all of these places.

This past year has proven to be one of striking transition as Palestinians, like the Sudanese, Iraqis, Jordanians, Moroccans, and Bahrainis, continue to mobilize movements on the ground as their rulers forge new deals that legitimize, condone, and participate in Israeli colonization and dispossession. However successful Israel may be in wooing the most reactionary and autocratic forces in the Arab world, that success will not help it to overcome the resistance of Palestinians and Arab peoples and their demands for freedom.

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## Endnotes

1. These results were based on face-to-face polling of over twenty-eight thousand individuals. See Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, “The 2019–2020 Arab Opinion Index: Main Results in Brief,” Arab Center Washington DC, 16 November 2020, <https://arabcenterdc.org/resource/the-2019-2020-arab-opinion-index-main-results-in-brief/#section6>.
2. For details, see Rashid I. Khalidi, “The Dahiya Doctrine, Proportionality, and War Crimes,” *JPS* 44, no. 1 (Autumn 2014): pp. 5–13, <https://doi.org/10.1525/jps.2014.44.1.5>.
3. France 24, “Israel ‘Formalising’ Defence Ties with Morocco on Minister’s Visit,” 23 November 2021, <https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20211123-israel-formalising-defence-ties-with-morocco-on-minister-s-visit>; Judah Ari Gross, “In Morocco, Gantz Signs Israel’s First-Ever Defense MOU with an Arab Country,” *Times of Israel*, 24 November 2021, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/in-morocco-gantz-signs-israels-first-ever-defense-mou-with-an-arab-country/>.
4. Jonathan Ferziger and Peter Waldman, “How Do Israel’s Tech Firms Do Business in Saudi Arabia? Very Quietly,” *Bloomberg Businessweek*, 2 February 2017, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/features/2017-02-02/how-do-israel-s-tech-firms-do-business-in-saudi-arabia-very-quietly>.
5. Elbit Systems, “Elbit Systems Establishes a Company in the United Arab Emirates,” PR and News, 14 November 2021, <https://elbitsystems.com/pr-new/elbit-systems-establishes-a-company-in-the-united-arab-emirates/>; Reuters, “UAE, Israel to Jointly Develop Unmanned Military, Commercial Vessels,” 18 November 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/uae-israel-jointly-design-unmanned-military-commercial-vessels-2021-11-18/>; Seth J. Frantzman, “Israel-Gulf Ties Grow via Dubai Air Show and Naval Drill,” *National Interest*, 15 November 2021, <https://nationalinterest.org/blog/buzz/israel-gulf-ties-grow-dubai-air-show-and-naval-drill-196308>.
6. Eran Lerman, “Military Diplomacy as a National Security Asset: Israel’s Widening Array of Joint Exercises,” Jewish News Syndicate, 18 November 2021, <https://www.jns.org/opinion/military-diplomacy-as-a-national-security-asset-israels-widening-array-of-joint-exercises/>; Al-Monitor staff, “UAE, Israel, Bahrain, US Conduct Joint Naval Exercise in Red Sea,” Al-Monitor, 11 November 2021, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2021/11/uae-israel-bahrain-us-conduct-joint-naval-exercise-red-sea>.
7. Lazar Berman, “Young Peace Activists Promote Abraham Accords in California,” *Times of Israel*, 22 November 2021, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/young-peace-activists-promote-abraham-accords-in-california/>.
8. The Jewish Agency, established as a “public body” under Article 4 of the 1922 League of Nations Mandate for Palestine, was a semisovereign entity whose political department effectively operated as a foreign ministry with full diplomatic privileges in major Western capitals and at the League of Nations in Geneva decades before Israel obtained formal independence in 1948.
9. TOI staff and AFP, “Israel, Jordan Sign Huge UAE-Brokered Deal to Swap Solar Energy and Water,” *Times of Israel*, 22 November 2021, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/israel-jordan-sign-uae-brokered-deal-to-swap-solar-energy-and-water/>.