



After historic Israel-UAE flight, other Muslim-majority countries considering to follow suit

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Earlier this week, an Israeli plane imprinted with the word “peace” on the outside of its cockpit flew from Tel Aviv to Abu Dhabi, symbolically sealing a landmark diplomatic deal between the Jewish state and the United Arab Emirates.

The El Al flight - carrying U.S. and Israeli leaders, including President Trump’s senior adviser and son-in-law Jared Kushner – was the first direct commercial passenger flight ever between the two countries.

The Aug. 13 deal is said to already be propelling other countries to follow the Emirates in formally shaking hands with the nation many still don't even recognize on a map, breaking the decades-long mandate in which many Muslim-majority and Arab countries refused to form ties until there is an enduring peace agreement with the Palestinians.

But what country is most likely to come next?

Bahrain's cabinet exalted the deal, and U.S. diplomats orchestrating the Israel-UAE agreement are reported to have discussed economic advancement in the capital, Manama, last year.

Moreover, Bahrain's prime minister is said to have talked to Israel's spy chief by phone as recently as mid-August, although Bahrain has denied such engagement took place. The tiny constitutional monarchy, which is tightly aligned to the UAE, also perceives Iran as an existential regional threat. Other warming indicators include last year's hosting of Jerusalem Chief Rabbi Shlomo Amar and a meeting with King Hamad bin Isa al-Khalifa in the capital, and Bahrainis competing in a May 2018 bike race – alongside UAE participants – inside Israel.

But to date, no official statement regarding Israel-Bahrain liaisons has been issued. Other experts have also pointed toward Oman, which was quick to laud the agreement and in years past has played as interlocutor between Israel and Arab states.

Sudan has also been named as a likely suitor, although its public messaging has been mixed. The East African nation's interim leader, Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, met with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in Uganda in February, signaling that early talks to normalize ties were in motion.

Soon after the UAE announcement was made, Sudan – which is currently under turmoil and transition in the rocky aftermath of the April 2019 ousting of long-running ruler Omar al-Bashir – declared it too was in the process but reneged on its communique amid a public backlash.

"Sudan, which has long been a global pariah due to its sponsorship of Al Qaeda as well as its egregious human rights violations in Darfur and elsewhere, is hoping to get itself off the U.S. government's list of state sponsors of terrorism," explained Raphael Marcus, research fellow at the Department of War Studies, King's College London. "There have been indications since the fall of Omar al-Bashir in Sudan that Sudan's new government believes its standing in the United States and globally will be improved by ties with Israel."

Over in the continent's north, Morocco has been listed as another nation prepping for some sort of Israel advancement, having played a significant part in an array of peace efforts over the years. The country has a small Jewish community, which once surpassed 250,000 in the mid-20th century but has dwindled to just 3,000.

Harley Lippman, a Miami-based businessman who has long engaged with the UAE in forging the Israel relationship in Washington, told Fox News that Israel and Morocco have been in talks for years and at times have come very close to an agreement. While negotiations are still on the table, a deal has yet to come to fruition.

"Bahrain is likely the closest to making a deal, followed by Oman and Sudan," he conjectured. "Sudan is the easiest, as they just want the sanctions lifted and they need making peace with Israel as a step to that."

Arab states have traditionally rebuffed formal diplomatic affinities with Israel while its conflict with the Palestinians has remained unresolved.

From Lippman's lens, the UAE mediation is "diplomacy at its best," and the Emirates were ultimately able to support the Palestinians by at least halting further annexation plans while bringing the Iranian matter to the vanguard.

"Is the Palestinian issue front and center now? We know that countries in the region have greater security concerns," he said. "Is the war in Yemen – which is being supported by Iran – more important to the UAE now? Yemen is on their doorstep."

Ami Ayalon, the author of the forthcoming memoir "Friendly Fire: How Israel Became Its Own Worst Enemy, and the Hope for Its Future" and former director of Israel's security agency Shin Bet, referred to the deal as "very good news," but highlighted that any future agreements still hinge upon addressing the Palestinian issue.

"This agreement tells us that Israel can make 'political arrangements' with Arab states if it makes concessions on the Palestinian issue," he surmised. "This is contrary to Netanyahu's traditional position that Israel can have normalization with Arab states without paying a price."

For many Gulf Arab countries, it comes down to the overall notion that animosity with Iran has become a more prominent cause for national security concern than the plight of the Palestinians.

At the forefront of that acrimony is Saudi Arabia. The Kingdom's Crown Prince and de facto ruler Mohammad bin Salman in 2018 hinted that direct relations with Israel could be mutually

beneficial, and it is widely known that the two countries cooperate to counter Tehran behind closed doors.

Despite a thawing of relations in recent years, Saudi publicly maintains that diplomatic ties are not on the cards – however, on Wednesday, Riyadh announced that it would allow flights between Israel and the UAE to utilize its airspace.

"By and large, this is seen as a sign of the gradual decline in the importance of the Palestinian cause among Arab regimes," said John Glaser, director of foreign policy studies at the CATO Institute. "The UAE hoped to get some credit for caring about the fate of the Palestinians, but since the deal only brought a temporary halt to Israeli annexation plans, the Palestinians have harshly criticized the UAE for 'betraying' them."

Yet unlike some other Muslim-majority nations with more volatile security systems, Glaser emphasized there is little leeway for citizens to express their dissent in the UAE.

"Only about 1.4 million people are citizens of the UAE – the other nearly 8 million people there are expatriates, usually in the country for jobs," he continued. "So the UAE barely has a citizenry to worry about."

In trumpeting the accomplishment in recent weeks, everyone from President Trump and Kushner, to national security adviser Robert O'Brien and Netanyahu, has advocated that other Arab and Muslim countries are on the path – or soon will be – of enacting Israeli alliances.

Another strong marketing point lies in what there is to gain economically.

Other nations will likely be looking to analyze the UAE's gains before taking their own conclusive next steps. Even before the Israel-UAE deal was inked, investors from both sides were fast in exploring and preparing for new opportunities – from finance and tourism to aviation and health – expected to come with the solidifying of relations.

The countries did do behind-the-scenes dealings in times past, but according to The Wall Street Journal, this entailed bringing in subsidiaries in third countries, such as Singapore or Cyprus, the need for virtual private networks, foreign passports to travel in-between, and even overseas phone lines given that Israel calls are typically blocked in much of the Arab space.

Yet it could bring bank or bust, experts caution.

The UAE is only the third Arab nation, after Egypt and Jordan, to have restored diplomatic relations with Israel, and financiers have underscored that treaties established more than 25 years ago have "produced meager economic dividends," a WSJ analysis of World Bank data showed.

And the risk of violence or uprising can never be ruled out.

"You can see the risks in what happened in Egypt after their peace deal with Israel in 1979 – the assassination of Sadat and fuel for radicals," noted Defense Priorities Policy Director, Benjamin Friedman. "But there's good reason to doubt that the Gulf states, which don't have a recent history of wars with Israel as Egypt then did, have publics that care about Israel and Palestine like Egypt's did back then. The leaders of the UAE are gambling that it doesn't resonate much with their public, and they are probably right."

However, a strong sell for the UAE and other regional players is that the country – unlike Egypt and Jordan – has never waged a direct war with Israel. Still, the issue of military equipment deals could prove to be the thorn in the otherwise rosy diplomatic dances.

"Various agreements between the UAE and Israel are currently being decided related to the economy, trade, COVID-19, and more quietly, security and intelligence. Telephone lines have already been linked up. (But) the elephant in the room is related to the UAE's purchase of F-35 jets from the United States, which Israel tacitly opposes," Marcus added. "Israel has long sought to maintain a 'qualitative military edge' in the Middle East. This is a pillar of Israel's traditional security concept."