

The Palestine Strategic Report 2020 – 2021



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Chapter Six

The Palestine Issue and the Arab World

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The Palestine Issue and the Arab World

Introduction

This chapter aims to explore the popular and official Arab positions vis-à-vis the Palestine Issue, in light of the proposals of former US President Donald Trump’s “peace” plan, known as the Deal of the Century, the normalization agreements signed between some Arab countries and Israel, and the subsequent eruption of military hostilities between the Palestinian resistance and Israel in the Sword of Jerusalem Battle (dubbed by Israel *Operation Guardian of the Walls*), triggered by the occupation’s practices in Jerusalem’s Sheikh Jarrah neighborhood and *al-Aqsa* Mosque.

The chapter contains four main sections: The first focuses on the position of the League of Arab States (LAS) and the Arab Summit. The second focuses on the positions and roles of the Arab states, including those neighbouring Palestine—Egypt, Jordan, Syria and Lebanon—and countries like the KSA and other Gulf states. It also addresses the position of Sudan, Morocco and other Arab states. This section develops from multiple angles, including the evolution of these countries’ international relations, diplomatic activities, positions on the internal Palestinian conflict, and their positions on the peace process, culminating with their relations with Israel.

The third section addresses developments related to Arab-Israeli normalization, overviewing its multiple forms, including aviation, medical normalization, telecoms, academic normalization, tourism, arts, media and sports. The fourth section addresses the popular Arab position’s trends, overviewing the leading popular events in support of the Palestinian people and their rights, and in rejection of normalization and the liquidation of the Palestine Issue.

First: LAS Positions and the Arab Summit

1. The Position on Trump’s Peace Plan and the Peace Process

The LAS Secretary-General Ahmad Abu al-Ghait declared that Trump’s plan represented a “major undermining of Palestinian rights.”¹ The LAS Council for its part rejected the US-Israeli Deal of the Century, for not meeting even the basic



minimum of Palestinian rights and aspirations, and for contradicting the reference frameworks agreed for the peace process. The LAS Council stressed that the Arab Peace Initiative, as agreed in 2002, is the basic minimum acceptable for peace with Israel, through ending the occupation of the Palestinian and Arab territories occupied in 1967; the establishment of a sovereign Palestinian state with East Jerusalem as its capital; finding a mutually acceptable just solution to the Palestinian refugee issue, in accordance with UN Resolution 194 of 1948; and affirming that Israel, as an occupation force and power, will not be engaged by the Arab states for normalization of relations unless it accepts the Arab Peace Initiative.² The Arab foreign ministers affirmed this position again during a meeting in February 2021, in which they affirmed their commitment to the two-state solution and the Arab Peace Initiative.³

However, instead of working to strengthen Palestinian resistance to the Deal of the Century plan, the Arab states have abandoned their support of the Palestinian position. This is evident in a report on the Palestinian general budget, which showed that Arab financial grants to the Palestinian budget declined by 85% in 2020, with the KSA alone cutting 81.4% of its support. Shukri Bishara, Palestinian finance minister at the time, said that “sisterly states have suspended grants and aid allocated to support the budget” without explaining why.⁴

The role of the LAS was limited to denouncing Israeli occupation practices, including seizure of land or international law violations. It also denounced the confiscation of lands belonging to the Islamic endowments in the Ibrahimi Mosque in Hebron.⁵ The Arab foreign ministers, at their emergency meeting in Cairo, said that the Israeli occupation government’s implementation of plans to annex Palestinian lands occupied in 1967 constituted “a war crime to be added to the Israeli record full of brutal crimes against the Palestinian people, and flagrant violations of the charter and resolutions of the United Nations and international law.”⁶ In the same context, the LAS called on the international community to assume its responsibilities in providing protection to the Palestinian people.⁷ It announced its intention to take practical steps to counter the annexation, but these intentions were not translated into actions on the ground. The LAS Secretary-General stated, “It is necessary to work at this stage to form the broadest possible international coalition to isolate Israel and its supporters, in this reckless and dangerous policy that threatens to ignite the region.” Hossam Zaki, assistant LAS Secretary-General, also

confirmed that the Secretary-General was making international contacts to build an alliance against the Israeli move, and show its grave danger to international peace and security, saying that he recently sent a number of messages bearing this meaning to Japan and India, Australia and Russia.⁸

2. Stance Towards Normalization

The LAS ignored its own previous decisions and statements rejecting any normalization with Israel before the implementation of the Arab Peace Initiative, with the Secretary-General refusing the Palestinians' request to hold an emergency meeting, against the background of the Emirati-Israeli deal.⁹ The Secretary-General's position shifted from wilful blindness to complicity, by dropping the Palestinian draft resolution rejecting the Emirati normalization agreement from the agenda of the Arab foreign ministers meeting.¹⁰ Abu al-Ghait justified his position by saying that "there is an Arab dispute over some concepts related to establishing peace with Israel, but everyone is committed to supporting the ceiling of Palestinian demands and rights as set and formulated by the Palestinian side."¹¹ He also claimed that the UAE-Israel agreement stopped the annexation of territories in WB.¹²

3. Internal Conflict and Reconciliation

The LAS reiterated its position in support of Palestinian reconciliation, by welcoming the outcomes of the meeting of the secretaries-general of the Palestinian factions, which was held in Ramallah and Beirut on 3/9/2020. Secretary-General Ahmad Abu al-Ghait affirmed that "the meeting is a positive step towards unifying the Palestinian ranks and agreeing on the priorities of Palestinian political action in the coming stage, under the umbrella of (the Palestine Liberation Organization), the sole legitimate representative of the Palestinian people."¹³ The LAS reaffirmed this position in decisions issued at the conclusion of the 156th ordinary meeting of foreign ministers, on 9/9/2021.¹⁴

4. Stance Towards Jerusalem

The LAS reiterated its position rejecting the declaration of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel, but it was just to condemnation and denunciation, without taking any practical measures against the countries that recognize Jerusalem as the capital of Israel. The League, as well as the Arab Parliament, condemned



Kosovo's recognition of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel, and its decision to open an embassy there.¹⁵ It also condemned the opening of a diplomatic office by the Czech Republic in Jerusalem.¹⁶

The League continued denouncing the systematic Israeli plans for *al-Aqsa* Mosque, and the repeated incursions into its compound.¹⁷ Although it decided to form a ministerial committee to address the Security Council countries to stop Israeli attacks against the Palestinians,¹⁸ nothing changed on the ground, and the Arab action remained limited to condemnation and denunciation. In the same context, and in an indication of the LAS's support of Jordan, the LAS stressed the importance of the Hashemite guardianship in Jerusalem and its role in protecting the holy sites.¹⁹

Second: The Positions and Roles of Some Key Arab States

1. Egypt

a. The Development of Egypt's Political Relations and Diplomatic Activities

Egypt's efforts to restore its regional role have increased. It held diplomatic meetings and summits that include leaders of pivotal countries in the region, in addition to the efforts to achieve de-escalation between the Palestinian resistance and Israel, as well as Palestinian reconciliation. Egypt convened a meeting in Cairo in January 2021 that included Jordan, France and Germany. On the sidelines of the meeting, a call was made for the immediate resumption of Palestinian-Israeli talks and the settlement of the conflict on the basis of the two-state solution.²⁰ In September 2021, Egypt also convened a tripartite presidential summit, which included Egyptian President 'Abdul Fattah al-Sisi, Jordan's King 'Abdullah II and Palestinian President Mahmud 'Abbas, to emphasize the importance of reviving a peaceful settlement and the option of a two-state solution.²¹

The Egyptian Foreign Ministry tried to play an active role in de-escalating the situation after the outbreak of the Sword of Jerusalem Battle, launched by the Palestinian resistance in response to occupation practices in Jerusalem and the Sheikh Jarrah neighborhood. However, Egyptian efforts to reach a truce was initially snibbed by Israel.²²

The steadfastness of Gazans, the escalation of popular resistance in most areas of historical Palestine, which includes WB, Jerusalem and the 1948 occupied territories, and the resistance continuation of launching missile strikes at the heart of Israel, all contributed to forcing Israel to deal with the Egyptian diplomatic openings, which received US support. The Egypt–US convergence aimed to establish a truce and rebuild GS, after it was devastated because of the Israeli aggression.²³

After the truce was agreed on, the Egyptian Foreign Ministry sought to build on it, by putting forward an initiative to hold negotiations between Israel, the PA and Hamas, fearing renewed confrontation and to maintain calm.²⁴ As for Israel, it sought to link the GS reconstruction issue to the resistance's release of its captured soldiers, which encouraged Egypt to move towards brokering a prisoner exchange deal. Thus, Major General 'Abbas Kamel, head of the Egyptian General Intelligence Service (EGIS), conducted intensive discussions in Tel Aviv about this issue.²⁵ However, the resistance refused to link the two issues of reconstruction and prisoner exchange, which prompted Egypt to propose a "road map" that does not include linking the two files.²⁶ Previously, a phone call was made between Egyptian President 'Abdul Fattah al-Sisi and Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett, in which the former stressed the importance of supporting Egypt's efforts to rebuild GS.²⁷ In light of this, Kamel visited Tel Aviv a second time to broker a lasting truce between the resistance and Israel, and in his meeting with Bennett in August 2021, he carried an invitation from al-Sisi to visit Cairo.²⁸

At the level of regional alliances, al-Sisi ratified the charter of the Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum (EMGF):²⁹ Seven countries, namely: Egypt, Jordan, Israel, Cyprus, Greece, Italy and Palestine, had signed on 22/9/2020, the statute of EMGF, establishing it as a regional intergovernmental organization, which set several goals, including coordinating the exploitation of gas resources in the Mediterranean. The signing ceremony was held virtually, bringing together the ambassadors of member states in Cairo, including Italy, Greece, Jordan, Israel and Cyprus. Other countries and blocs may join soon, including France, the EU and the US. Then Israeli Energy Minister Yuval Steinitz revealed that he had worked with his Egyptian counterpart for three years to establish the regional gas forum, which it is currently being developed to be a regional organization that also includes the PA.³⁰



b. The Position on the Internal Palestinian Conflict

Egypt has maintained its previous stance towards the Palestinian factions, in terms of considering the PLO and its head as the representatives of the Palestinians, while the relationship with the resistance factions fluctuated up and down according to political events. On the one hand, Egypt sells gas to GS at prices higher than the international price.³¹ On the other hand, in an attempt to absorb Palestinian anger after the killing of two fishermen by the Egyptian navy, Egypt released 32 Gazan detainees.³² By contrast, following the Sword of Jerusalem Battle, and in order to strengthen the position of the Egyptian regime, the Egyptian presidency announced the allocation of \$500 million to rebuild GS,³³ in addition to sending an aid convoy to the Gazans.³⁴ In addition, ‘Abbas Kamel laid the foundation stone for a residential neighborhood in GS,³⁵ as Egypt promised to rebuild the demolished towers there, with the reconstruction carried out through Palestinian companies and workers to benefit Palestinian labour.³⁶ The first phase of reconstruction began under the supervision of an Egyptian engineering delegation in September 2021.³⁷ However, the resistance leadership in GS later expressed its dismay at the slowdown in Egyptian reconstruction works.³⁸

Egypt was keen to control the reconciliation file and not to allow any other party to interfere with it, using the Rafah Crossing as leverage. This was embodied in the pressure it exerted on the Gazans on account of agreements related to Palestinian reconciliation, on the side-lines of the Istanbul meetings and the meeting of the secretaries-general of the factions in Beirut and Ramallah related to reconciliation. Egypt arrested 14 people close to Hamas while they were traveling through Egypt.³⁹ In February 2021, when Egypt sponsored the Palestinian national dialogue to broker Palestinian reconciliation and dialogue, it opened the Rafah Crossing for an “indefinite period,” which resulted in the factions’ agreement on the mechanisms for holding Palestinian elections, which were postponed later by Mahmud ‘Abbas.⁴⁰ In June 2021, after the end of the Sword of Jerusalem Battle, al-Sisi invited the Palestinian factions to a meeting in Cairo to discuss ending the division.⁴¹ However, the gap between the two sides, Hamas and Fatah, with regard to reconciliation and the reconstruction of GS, prevented the completion of this meeting. It was then postponed for an unknown period.⁴²

We can say that the media campaigns of Egypt against Hamas are indicators of the fluctuation of the relationship with the resistance and GS. After Al Jazeera

Arabic program titled *Ma Khufia A'tham* (The Hidden is More Immense) aired an episode focusing on the Egyptian siege of the resistance in GS, Egyptian state-linked media launched a counter media campaign against Hamas.⁴³ However, the relationship between Hamas and Egypt saw some recovery, after the Sword of Jerusalem Battle. This was demonstrated by Cairo hosting in October 2021 the first meeting of the newly elected Hamas political bureau, and the meeting of the movement's leadership with EGIS Head Major General 'Abbas Kamel, to discuss the truce, the exchange of prisoners. reconstruction and reconciliation.⁴⁴

c. The Position on the Peace Process

Contradicting the LAS's position on the Deal of the Century plan, the Egyptian Foreign Ministry welcomed efforts made by the US administration to reach a comprehensive and just peace for the Palestine issue, which would support stability and security in the Middle East and end the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. It added that Egypt sees the importance of the US administration's initiative in terms of reaching a settlement for the Palestine issue, in a way that restores the Palestinian people's full legitimate rights, through the establishment of their independent and sovereign state on the occupied Palestinian territories, in accordance with international legitimacy and its decisions. It called on "the two concerned parties to carefully study the US vision of achieving peace, and examine all its dimensions."⁴⁵ In the same context, al-Sisi praised the Emirati-Israeli agreement that allegedly would stop Israel's annexation of WB.⁴⁶ He also said that the "peace" agreement between Bahrain and Israel is a historic step to achieve a just settlement of the Palestine Issue,⁴⁷ and praised the announcement of the normalization of relations between Morocco and Israel.⁴⁸

d. Relations with Israel

Several Israeli parties praised the improvement of the relations between Egypt and Israel, which extended to strengthening political, security and economic relations. According to a report by Mitvim—The Israeli Institute for Regional Foreign Policies, prepared by former Israeli ambassador in Cairo Haim Koren, the strategic cooperation between the two parties has been strengthened, based on a set of common strategic interests, on top of which confronting Islamic movements, Turkey and Iran, and adopting the same approach in managing the Palestine issue.⁴⁹ In this context, the Israeli orientalist Liad Porat declared that the legacy of Egyptian



President Hosni Mubarak regarding the relations between the two parties was renewed during the al-Sisi era.⁵⁰ The Israeli orientalist Jackie Khogy wrote that the Egyptian school curricula under al-Sisi, present a conciliatory discourse towards Israel.⁵¹ Meanwhile, the Israeli ambassador to Egypt, Amira Oren, confirmed that the bilateral coordination between the two parties on security and economic issues reached a new peak since al-Sisi took over the reins of power.⁵²

There were numerous indications of coordination in the “positions” between the two sides. The *Israel Hayom* newspaper claimed that there was coordination on the annexation plan, and that they even reached understandings that allow, on the one hand, to bring the plan to impose Israeli sovereignty into effect, and on the other hand allow the opposition of Arab states as soon as the plans are actually implemented, without this leading to a major impact on political relations between countries.⁵³ In this context, Eli Cohen, Israeli Minister of Intelligence, affirmed the strengthening of the alliance between the two countries, saying that Israel, under US umbrella, is building a Sudanese, Emirati, Egyptian and Jordanian alliance, and that other countries in the region are expected to join.⁵⁴ As an indication of improving relations, in September 2021, al-Sisi met with Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett in Sharm el-Sheikh, in the first public visit of an Israeli prime minister to Egypt in 10 years. During the meeting, efforts to revive the peace process, maintain calm and rebuild GS were discussed.⁵⁵ Bennett announced after that it was a very important meeting, in which a number of files were discussed, including strengthening joint cooperation in all fields, especially trade, and regional and international issues.⁵⁶ Bennett’s visit was followed by Foreign Minister Yair Lapid’s arrival in Cairo in December 2021, and his meeting with al-Sisi and EGIS Head Major General ‘Abbas Kamel, to discuss the “economy for security” plan for GS.⁵⁷

As an indication of the improvement in economic relations between the two countries, Israel began supplying gas to Egypt in July 2020. According to Makan—Israeli Broadcasting Corporation, there is an agreement between the two sides to provide Egyptian facilities with one billion cubic meters of natural gas annually.⁵⁸ In this context, Israeli Energy Minister Yuval Steinitz announced an agreement with his Egyptian counterpart Tarek el-Molla to build a pipeline to connect Israel’s offshore Leviathan natural gas field with liquefaction stations in northern Egypt, to increase gas exports to Europe via Egypt’s liquefaction

facilities.⁵⁹ In the same context, in March 2021, an Egyptian-Israeli meeting was held in Sharm el-Sheikh to enhance cooperation between the two parties, which included a high-level Israeli delegation and Israeli businessmen. The meeting, which Ofir Gendelman, the prime minister's spokesperson, described as the largest in 20 years, discussed expanding trade between the two countries in agriculture, water, electricity and tourism.⁶⁰ This economic cooperation was demonstrated by an EGYPTAIR announcement that it is considering starting flights to Tel Aviv.⁶¹

Security relations between the two sides have also been strengthened. Former Israeli ambassador to Egypt, Itzhak Levanon stated, "In all the rounds against Hamas, it was Egypt that brought calm. This time there has been a change that I believe Israel should strengthen, and that is al-Sisi's greater understanding of Jerusalem's security needs."⁶² In this context, Al Jazeera revealed, in an investigation, the presence of an Egyptian naval base, the Berenice Naval Base, that takes part in enforcing the siege of the Palestinian resistance in the GS.⁶³ In addition, on the sidelines of a meeting with the EGIS Head Major General 'Abbas Kamel, Israel asked Egypt to prevent Hamas from regaining its combat capabilities.⁶⁴ It seems that al-Sisi took advantage of this atmosphere to ask Bennett to allow the introduction of Egyptian reinforcements into North Sinai, in the demilitarized zones, in order to enable the Egyptian army to eliminate "extremist Islamic organizations," which was approved.⁶⁵

The bilateral security understandings reflected negatively on GS in terms of tightening the siege. For example, the Egyptian army killed two fishermen brothers and wounded a third, under the pretext that they had entered Egyptian territorial waters.⁶⁶ The tightening of the siege was also manifested in the acceleration of the construction of a wall between Sinai and GS, the construction of a sea barrier between the GS and Sinai,⁶⁷ and the demolition of tunnels, as the Egyptian army did in April 2021 when it destroyed five tunnels on the border with GS.⁶⁸ In addition, poisonous gas was sprayed into the tunnels, which led to the death of three people in a commercial tunnel on the border between GS and Egypt.⁶⁹

Egypt's al-Sisi regime used the Rafah Crossing, considered a lifeline for the people of GS, as leverage to put pressure on the resistance there, linking its opening and closing to the extent to which the resistance complies with Egyptian demands. The repeated closure of the crossing was justified as something that fell within the framework of Egyptian national security.⁷⁰ Egypt had closed the Rafah Crossing



in August 2021 (until further notice), as an expression of its dissatisfaction with the demonstrations on the border with Israel, against the continuation of the siege. Egypt had previously asked Hamas to impose calm, in exchange for restoring the situation to what it was at the crossing, especially regarding the movement of goods at the Karm Abu Salem Crossing.⁷¹

Egypt later resumed operating the crossing as part of a new security mechanism in agreement with Israel, which included tightening security measures to prevent materials that would help Hamas build its military and security capabilities. In this context, Egypt informed Hamas leadership in GS that all materials designated for reconstruction, which enter through the Rafah Crossing, will remain under the exclusive supervision and management of the Egyptian engineering teams.⁷²

2. Jordan

a. The Development of Jordan's Political Relations and Diplomatic Activity

Jordan participated in some Egyptian diplomatic endeavours, such as the Cairo meeting in January 2021 that included France and Germany. The meeting called for the immediate resumption of Palestinian-Israeli talks and the settlement of the conflict on the basis of the two-state solution.⁷³ Jordan also participated in the tripartite summit held by Egypt in September 2021, at the level of presidents, which included the King of Jordan, the Palestinian President and the Egyptian President, to discuss reviving the peace process.⁷⁴

As for relations with the US, the US bilateral aid to Jordan was \$1.525 billion in 2020, and \$1.65 billion in 2021, including economic aid reaching \$1.082 billion in 2020 and \$1.122 billion in 2021, while military aid was the same amount each year; \$425 million in 2020 and 2021.⁷⁵

b. The Position on the Palestinian Internal Conflict

The Jordanian political system does not hide its bias towards the PA at the expense of Hamas. However, it deals with the internal conflict rationally, in terms of maintaining minimum relations with all parties. Despite internal calls (The Islamic Action Front Party) to restore relations with Hamas,⁷⁶ the Jordanian government maintained its previous position not to reopen a Hamas office. Yet Jordan has kept the door open by allowing the Hamas leadership to move under umbrella of “humanitarian cases” as happened when some leaders of the Hamas political bureau were allowed to set up a funeral service for the deceased Hamas leader

Ibrahim Ghushah.⁷⁷ However, the official Jordanian position exhibits a preference for dealing with the PLO and the PA, which is in line with media reports that claimed there is an Egyptian, Jordanian and Emirati plan to prevent Hamas from winning any elections (which were not held anyway).⁷⁸ As an additional indication of this bias, Jordan agreed with the PA to establish a joint free zone, and promote trade between the two sides.⁷⁹ In return, and as a kind of attempt to have balance in the relationship, the Jordanian government is working to establish a Jordanian hospital in GS at a cost of \$72 million.⁸⁰

c. The Position on the Peace Process

In response to the Deal of the Century plan, Jordan affirmed its support of the two-state solution.⁸¹ Jordanian lawmakers rejected the plan, echoing the official position rejecting it.⁸² In the same context, the Jordanian Foreign Minister considered that the annexation of areas in the occupied Palestinian territories would kill the two-state solution and would undermine the chances of a just “peace.”⁸³ The Jordanian monarch escalated the tone rejecting the annexation plan, declaring that Israel’s annexation of parts of WB would lead to a “massive conflict” with Jordan,⁸⁴ and affirmed that Jordan’s position was strongly against annexation.⁸⁵

As for the normalization agreements between the UAE and Israel, the Jordanian Foreign Minister announced that the agreement will be judged based on what Israel will do later, in terms of ending the occupation, which would lead to de-escalation, while continuing with occupation would keep the causes of tension present.⁸⁶ Jordan repeated the same position after the normalization agreement between Bahrain and Israel, as the Foreign Minister said that the condition for a just and comprehensive “peace” remains by ending Israeli occupation.⁸⁷ The Jordanian king reiterated that “Achieving just and comprehensive peace on the basis of the two-state solution is our strategic choice,” and stressed that “denying the Palestinian people their just and legitimate rights is the very reason our region continues to suffer conflict and instability.”⁸⁸

d. Relations with Israel

There was a fluctuation in relations between Jordan and Israel in the economic, security and diplomatic aspects, due to occupation practices, whether in Jerusalem or throughout the occupied territories. On the economic side, the Jordanian parliament approved by a majority a draft resolution banning the import of gas from Israel.⁸⁹ An agreement was signed between Israel and Jordan to shorten



flights, using the airspace of both sides to shorten flights to the Gulf, Asia, the Far East, Europe and North America, as well as flights from China that pass through Iran, by allowing them to pass through Israeli airspace.⁹⁰ In this context, KAN—Israeli Public Broadcasting Corporation reported that Jordan and Israel were intensifying their contacts to establish joint projects to improve bilateral relations.⁹¹ These contacts resulted in an Israeli agreement to raise Jordanian exports to the Palestinians from \$160 million annually to \$700 million.⁹² Moreover, a “special” agreement was signed between Jordan and Israel to import Jordanian agricultural products, in order to cover Israeli needs in the year of the “Shmita,” the Sabbath of the Land where under Judaism it should be left fallow.⁹³ Jordan and Israel also signed in Dubai, with Emirati funding and US sponsorship, a declaration of intent to cooperate in the production of electricity from solar energy and water desalination. The agreement stipulates that Jordan will work to generate electricity from solar energy for Israel, and in return Israel will work on the desalination of water for the benefit of Jordan, which suffers from drought.⁹⁴

The security relations between the two parties have remained relatively stable, where they were not affected much by the political tension resulting from the Israeli transgressions in Jerusalem, and the attempt to implement the annexation project. In June 2020, the State Security Court began trying five Jordanians on charges of planning operations against targets inside Israel.⁹⁵ In addition, the State Security Court sentenced a Jordanian prisoner held by Israel to five years in prison, and considered him a fugitive from justice, on charges of “threatening to use violence,” after he attacked several settlers in 2018, which led to the injury of a number of them, after he managed to enter the occupied city of Eilat, for the purpose of work.⁹⁶ In a related context, Jordan decided to deport the Palestinian prisoner Nizar al-Tamimi, released in the prisoner exchange operation known as the “Devotion of the Free” deal, on the grounds that his residency had expired.⁹⁷ In July 2021, Jordanian intelligence also announced that it had thwarted a plot aimed at killing Israeli soldiers on the border,⁹⁸ while the Israeli army announced in September 2021 that it had thwarted an arms smuggling operation in the Jordan Valley.⁹⁹

Diplomatic relations between the two sides witnessed a state of ebb and flow. The relationship was strained during the time of Benjamin Netanyahu’s government, but it witnessed an improvement with Netanyahu’s stepping down and the formation of the Bennett government. Although meetings were held between the two sides, some secret and others public, relations with the Netanyahu government

remained lukewarm. *Yedioth Ahronoth* newspaper revealed that in December 2020, a secret meeting was held between the Jordanian king and Defense Minister Benny Gantz,¹⁰⁰ followed by a public meeting between the Jordanian foreign minister and his Israeli counterpart, in which they discussed re-launching negotiations between Israel and the PA.¹⁰¹ As an indication of the tense relationship between the two sides, the Jordanian crown prince cancelled his visit to *al-Aqsa* Mosque, despite Netanyahu's claim to have settled the dispute,¹⁰² and tensions remained. Gantz stated that Netanyahu had seriously damaged relations with Jordan.¹⁰³

The practices of the Israeli forces also contributed to the tension, especially the attempt to forcibly remove the residents of the Sheikh Jarrah neighborhood. The Jordanian Foreign Ministry had announced Jordan's ratification of 14 property ownership documents with the residents of Sheikh Jarrah neighborhood, and that it handed the Palestinian Foreign Ministry, the original proprietors and their lawyers a certificate stating that the Ministry of Construction and Reconstruction signed an agreement with UNRWA "to construct 28 housing units in Sheikh Jarrah neighborhood."¹⁰⁴ In this context, the Jordanian Foreign Minister declared that Jerusalem is a red line and that Israel is playing with fire, saying its continued aggression and arrogance will have repercussions on all issues, including Jordanian-Israeli relations.¹⁰⁵ 95 lawmakers had signed a bill on the relations with Israel urging the expulsion of its ambassador from Jordan, due to the Israeli encroachments in Jerusalem.¹⁰⁶

In the same context, during the Sword of Jerusalem Battle, a massive march was organized towards the Jordanian border in support of Jerusalem and GS.¹⁰⁷ On the official level, Jordan rejected an Israeli "Property Rights Settlement and Land Registration" bill in occupied Jerusalem, and the official spokesperson for the Jordanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs stressed that "the international law recognises East Jerusalem as an occupied city by Israel in 1967; it confirms the invalidity of all Israeli administrative and legislative measures that seek to change the status quo in the occupied city."¹⁰⁸ In a speech, the Jordanian king stressed that Jordan will continue to work to preserve the historical and legal status quo in the city of Jerusalem.¹⁰⁹

Despite the tension in relations, Israel expressed concern after the announced coup attempt targeting the Jordanian regime. Former Mossad chief Danny Yatom stated that the incident in Jordan is worrying for Israel and that it is a disturbing

event. Israeli Defense Minister Benny Gantz commented on the coup attempt by saying, “A strong and flourishing Jordan is a security and economic interest for us, and we need to do what we can to help them,” adding, “But as I said, regarding the internal developments there — that’s an internal issue.”¹¹⁰

Relations between the two parties improved with Bennett’s arrival as prime minister. Bennett approved the sale of water to Jordan (after Netanyahu refused to do so), so that the annual quantity does not exceed 50 million cubic meters, until the end of 2022.¹¹¹ According to the Israeli press, Bennett agreed with the Jordanian monarch when he met him to open a new page in relations.¹¹² This agreement was reflected when the new Israeli ambassador, Eitan Surkis, presented his credentials to the King of Jordan,¹¹³ as well as by increasing the frequency of meetings between the two countries, which were hitherto mostly secret, as happened with the meeting of Israeli President Isaac Herzog with the Jordanian monarch, at a Jordanian invitation.¹¹⁴ In addition, a secret meeting took place between the King and Israeli Foreign Minister Yair Lapid, in the capital, Amman.¹¹⁵

3. Syria

Israel continued its attacks on Syrian territory in the absence of a deterrent. The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights reported that the Israeli attacks, which lasted three months (from May to the end of July 2020), killed 60 pro-Iranian militants in Syria.¹¹⁶ The Israeli army claimed that it destroyed a third of the Syrian air defense during the attacks it carried out in the last three years 2017–2020, using 4,239 weapons against 955 targets. The Israeli army justified its attacks as aimed at slowing down Iran’s entrenchment in Syria and the development of Hizbullah’s missiles. Consequently, the Israeli army launches frequent raids targeting Syrian regime, Iranian and Hizbullah sites in Syria, as well as convoys of weapons or equipment destined for Lebanon. At the same time, the Israeli army claimed that Syrian air defenses fired 844 anti-aircraft missiles, to respond to the Israeli violations of the Syrian airspace, which it described as a “sharp spike compared to previous years.” The Israeli army stated that some anti-aircraft missiles launched through the air defense system of the Syrian army were able to intercept missiles launched by the air force.¹¹⁷

At the political level, Syria stuck to its position rejecting any agreements or treaties with Israel. The Syrian Foreign Ministry expressed this by affirming its “steadfast position based on adhering to land and rights, and rejecting concessions

and unilateral agreements, regardless of their form or content.”¹¹⁸ Syrian President Bashar al-Assad emphasized this position by saying, “We can establish normal relations with Israel only when we regain our land.”¹¹⁹ Despite the initial Syrian refusal to conduct political negotiations with Israel, the two sides announced a prisoner exchange deal brokered by Russia, after two Syrian shepherds arrested for crossing the border were returned,¹²⁰ in exchange for an Israeli girl who entered the Syrian border, and arrested by the Syrian security services. *Haaretz* newspaper revealed that the exchange deal included a secret clause stipulating that Israel finances the purchase of the Russian Sputnik V COVID-19 vaccine for an amount of \$1.2 million.¹²¹

At the level of Syrian-Palestinian relations, a Fatah delegation met the Syrian Deputy Foreign Minister, Faisal al-Mikdad, in October 2020 at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in the Syrian capital, Damascus, where the Fatah delegation included Palestinian ambassador to Syria Anwar ‘Abdul Hadi and the Fatah Central Committee members Jibril Rajoub, Samir al-Rifa‘i and Rouhi Fattouh. They discussed ways to build a Palestinian partnership between the factions of the Palestinian political spectrum.¹²² Also, the Director-General of the Political Department of the PLO, Ambassador Anwar ‘Abdul Hadi, discussed with the Syrian Minister of Social Affairs and Labour Salwa ‘Abdullah the situation of refugees in the Palestinian RCs, and ways of returning the people to the al-Yarmouk RC, especially in light of the decision issued to facilitate their return. ‘Abdullah said that the Palestinians in Syria are our children, and in all our laws and legislations they have talked about the Syrian Arab citizen or their equivalent, where only the children of Palestine are their equivalent. She indicated that any work that the Syrian state does, for any citizen on Syrian soil, will be replicated in the al-Yarmouk RC, calling for solidarity to return to normal life in Syria.¹²³

Bashar al-Assad also received in Damascus a delegation that included several leaders and representatives of Palestinian forces and factions, but Hamas representatives were absent from the meeting. Al-Assad said that the Oslo Accords were a “big blunder,” stressing that Syria will always be against these agreements and against the “Quartet,” because negotiations through the Quartet mean negotiations under the US ceiling. On the sidelines of the meeting, al-Assad saluted “all the resistance fighters without exception.” When the name of Hamas was mentioned, he repeated “all the resistance fighters,” adding that “Syria is



ready for whatever you need. We are part of the axis of resistance, militarily and politically.” He said that Syria’s decision to “rebuild the al-Yarmouk camp is firm, and together we are following the implementation mechanisms,” stressing at the same time the importance of the right of return.¹²⁴

4. Lebanon:

a. Diplomatically

There is a near consensus in Lebanon to reject the Deal of the Century and adhere to the Arab Peace Initiative. During a call between Lebanese President Michel Aoun and his Palestinian counterpart Mahmud ‘Abbas, the former affirmed Lebanon’s solidarity, as president and people, with the Palestinian people against the latest developments due to the Deal of the Century. The Speaker of the Lebanese Parliament, Nabih Berri, said that “the Deal of the Century aborts the last remaining Palestinian dream of establishing its independent state with Al-Quds Al-Sharif as its capital.” He stressed:

Lebanon and the Lebanese will not be false witnesses in the new ceremony of the execution of the Palestinian people and their legitimate rights, foremost of which is the right of return, and will not accept under any circumstances to be a partner in selling or bartering any of these rights for thirty pieces of silver.

Then-Foreign Minister Nassif Hitti said that “the Lebanese position on the Deal of the Century is based on the 2002 Arab Summit and calls for achieving a just peace by establishing an independent Palestinian state with East Jerusalem as its capital.”

For his part, the Grand Mufti of the Lebanese Republic, Sheikh ‘Abdul Latif Darian, affirmed that “the so-called Deal of the Century is a liquidation of the Palestine issue, and it will be doomed to failure.”¹²⁵

In a related context, the Lebanese President renewed Lebanon’s refusal to resettle Palestinian refugees. In his speech before the 76th session of the UN General Assembly, Aoun said that Lebanon “reiterates its position rejecting any form of settlement of Palestinian refugees, based on the necessity to find a solution to the Palestinian issue in accordance with relevant international resolutions, specifically those guaranteeing the right of return.”¹²⁶

b. Lebanese-Palestinian Relations

Some Lebanese still deal with Palestinian refugees in Lebanon in a negative way. For example, the head of the Lebanese Forces Party, Samir Geagea, called for a siege on the Palestinian RCs to prevent Palestinian refugees from entering and leaving them, provided that the state secures the supplies they need, under the pretext of curtailing the COVID-19 pandemic.¹²⁷ In the same context, human rights organizations appealed to the concerned authorities in Lebanon to allow Palestinian refugees stranded in the UAE to return to Beirut, after the closure of air and land ports due to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic.¹²⁸ These appeals clashed with the decision of the General Directorate of Lebanese General Security to not allow the return of Palestinian refugees to Lebanon on board evacuation planes, which the Lebanese authorities organized for their citizens stranded in various countries of the world. The evacuation excluded Palestinian refugees in Lebanon carrying Palestinian travel document or PA passports.¹²⁹

In a related context, Nazih Najm, a member of the Lebanese Parliament from the Future Movement bloc, angered many Palestinians, after urging the UN to expel Palestinian refugees from Lebanon, declaring that “a million and a half Syrian and 400 thousand Palestinian refugees live in Lebanon. Lebanese government incurred the 400 thousand Palestinians for prolonged years as well as the Syrians. We call the international community, who is responsible for their existence in Lebanon, to return them to their countries,” forgetting that the presence of these refugees is a result of their forced displacement, not their will.¹³⁰

On the other hand, the Minister of Labor in the new Lebanese government, Mustafa Bayram, affirmed his support of the rights of refugees in the Lebanese RCs, and his quest for “the Palestinian people not to be subjected to injustice again, or to be subjected to prejudice in their place of residence.” He pledged that he will contribute to “amending the laws that prevent the Palestinians from being redressed in terms of justice and labour rights, in a manner that does not conflict with Lebanese laws and the interest of the Lebanese worker.”¹³¹ Indeed, the minister issued instructions allowing Palestinians born in Lebanon to work in more than 70 professions that were exclusive to Lebanese only, which angered some Lebanese parties, which accused the minister of seeking to settle refugees in Lebanon. Meanwhile, the Palestinian factions in Lebanon praised the minister’s decision, but expressed concerns that the decision may be aborted, as it depends on



the instructions of the minister and not on a law, which means that this order can be cancelled in the event of a change of minister.¹³²

The head of the Lebanese Progressive Socialist Party, Walid Jumblatt, met with the head of the political bureau of Hamas, Isma‘il Haniyyah, where Jumblatt stated, “My advice to Haniyyah is [fostering] the unity of the Palestinian position, and it is the most important and the foundation of everything, regardless of the pressures. I am ready to help with this issue with my capabilities,” and he promised Haniyyah to facilitate the basic right of living of Palestinian refugees, as “racial discrimination is unfair to them.”¹³³ Haniyyah visited Lebanon in September 2020, and the visit was met with mixed reactions. While Hizbullah encouraged the visit, the Lebanese political group opposed to Hizbullah was concerned by the visit, and the prospect of turning Lebanon into a launching pad and arena for conflict with Israel.¹³⁴

Hizbullah maintained its strong relationship and support for Hamas throughout the period covered by this report. However, this relationship was marred by some sensitivity and tension following the visit of Khalid Mish‘al, the head of the Hamas movement abroad, to Lebanon in December 2021 to participate in the activities of the 34th anniversary of the founding of Hamas and address the repercussions of the death of four Hamas cadres in Burj al-Shamali RC. It seems that Hizbullah did not see the timing of the visit as appropriate, given reports that the party, Iran and the Syrian regime held a negative view of Mish‘al, because of his position on the events in Syria. Hizbullah reportedly sought to thwart or cancel a number of official meetings that were on Mish‘al’s schedule, including his meeting with the President of the Republic and the Speaker of Parliament. However, Mish‘al engaged in many other activities, especially in the Palestinian context. It seems the two sides were keen not to escalate tensions in the media, and to return the water to its course after that.¹³⁵

c. Relations with Israel

Security tensions have an impact on the relationship between Israel and Lebanon. While the Israelis continued to make threats to launch a war against the Lebanese resistance represented by Hizbullah, negotiations were being held between the two parties over maritime borders. Hassan Diab, the former Lebanese Prime Minister, confirmed that Lebanon would not stand silent vis-à-vis repeated Israeli violations of Lebanon’s borders, and pointed out that Israel should be aware that “we will no longer submit to these violations as if they are a normal matter.”¹³⁶

As for the Israelis, following a limited clash with the resistance in the Shebaa Farms, Netanyahu said, “Everything that is happening right now is the result of an Iranian attempt to establish itself in our region.” He added, “Nasrallah is serving the Iranian interests at the expense of the Lebanese people,” and warned that he wouldn’t “advise anyone to test us.”¹³⁷

The tension in the relationship did not prevent reaching an agreement regarding the borders. The Speaker of the Lebanese Parliament, Nabih Berri, announced reaching a “framework agreement” to demarcate the maritime borders with Israel, noting that his mission had now ended after a decade of leading the negotiations, to be resumed by the army and the Presidency of the Republic with the aim of reaching a final agreement, stressing the link between demarcation of both land and sea borders.¹³⁸

The internal Lebanese political division was reflected in the reactions to Berri’s announcement. Opponents of the Amal Movement and Hizbullah saw that the function of the party’s arms ended with its endorsement of these negotiations with Israel, while the team loyal to Hizbullah and Amal argued that Berri’s efforts resulted in reaching an agreement that would be in the interest of Lebanon and would revive its economic situation.¹³⁹ In response to the accusations that the agreement embodies normalization, Hizbullah’s parliamentary bloc said that the negotiations to demarcate the maritime and land borders in the south of the country do not fall within the context of reconciliation with the Israeli occupation, and are not related to “the normalization policies pursued by Arab countries that have never believed in, or practiced, the option of resistance against the enemy of the nation.”¹⁴⁰ Despite squabbles between the Lebanese parties, the first round of negotiations on demarcating the borders between Israel and Lebanon was held in mid-October 2020, at the headquarters of the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) in the Naqoura area in southern Lebanon, to be resumed after two weeks.¹⁴¹

During negotiations, Israel refused to discuss Lebanon’s request to expand the scope of the disputed area in the maritime borders, as the Lebanese side demands full control of two gas fields in the Mediterranean Sea, which Israel claims. According to the Israeli sources, the Lebanese negotiators in Ras al-Naqoura surprised the Israeli delegation by presenting a new map showing that they are not only demanding the disputed area of 860 km², but also an additional 1,430 km²



within the Israeli economic zone.¹⁴² Negotiations between the two sides stopped after four sessions as the Lebanese demanded an additional 1,430 km² of sea, based on the amendment of the decree deposited by the Lebanese government at the United Nations, so that the disputed area with Israel became 2,290 km² instead of 860 km².¹⁴³ However, after a US intervention, negotiations resumed between the two parties again in May 2021, while Lebanon affirmed its position to resume the negotiations as they ended, meaning on the basis of the disputed 2,290 km².¹⁴⁴

The relationship between Israel and Lebanon on the security level was marred by ebb and flow. Despite negotiations over the demarcation of the border, the Secretary-General of Hizbullah Hassan Nasrallah continued to wage a psychological war against Israel by declaring on December 2020 that his party possesses twice the number of precision missiles that it had a year earlier.¹⁴⁵

Matters between Israel and Lebanon escalated in conjunction with the events of the Sword of Jerusalem Battle. A young Lebanese man was killed following demonstrations at the border, denouncing the Israeli aggression against *al-Aqsa* Mosque and the Palestinian people.¹⁴⁶ A few days later, six grad rockets were fired from Lebanon at the Upper Galilee, and Israel responded with artillery shelling.¹⁴⁷ In order not to allow matters to deteriorate further, the Lebanese army intervened by setting up checkpoints to prevent the protesting Palestinian convoys from reaching the border with Israel.¹⁴⁸

Nasrallah warned Israel against tampering with Jerusalem and the holy sites. He said that any harm that would befall them would lead to a regional war.¹⁴⁹ The security tension remained despite the end of the Sword of Jerusalem Battle. The borders did not calm down before and after the battle, as the Israeli escalation did not stop.

In July 2020, the Israeli army announced the downing of one of its drones in southern Lebanon, after which the Israeli artillery fired several shells at Lebanese border areas. On 1/2/2021, Hizbullah shot down an Israeli drone over the town of Blida in the south, while in May 2021 missiles were launched from Lebanon towards northern Israel three times. Israeli forces responded by bombing Lebanese border areas.¹⁵⁰ In August 2021, rockets were launched from Lebanon at northern Israel, and the Israeli artillery responded by firing 100 shells.¹⁵¹ In the wake of the Lebanese Hizbullah's response to the Israeli bombing of Lebanese lands, the Israeli Defense Minister, Benny Gantz, warned that "while the situation in their

country is already dire, Israel was prepared to make it even worse.” Gantz stated, “We recommend that Hezbollah, the Lebanese army and the Lebanese government don’t test the State of Israel,” adding “ ‘We have no interests in Lebanon, except [in maintaining] security and quiet,’ he said, adding that quiet will be met with quiet.”¹⁵² However, despite Gantz’s threats, Hizbullah is still preparing itself for an upcoming confrontation. An Israeli report stated that there is a network of Hizbullah tunnels, “inter-regional” tunnels, extending tens of kilometers from the southern borders to Beirut and the Bekaa. The report indicated that these tunnels are prepared for offensive and defensive purposes, and are designed to allow the transfer of personnel, weapons, and equipment, and that work on building this network had begun in the aftermath of the 2006 Second Lebanon War with the assistance of experts from North Korea and Iran.¹⁵³

5. KSA and the Gulf States

a. The Development of Their Political Relations and Diplomatic Activities

Bahrain and the UAE rejected a Palestinian draft resolution stating that the Emirati-Israeli-US tripartite declaration known as the “Abraham Accords” does not prejudice the Arab vision based on the principle of the two-state solution, the principle of land for “peace,” and the Arab Peace Initiative of 2002. Bahrain also rejected a Palestinian request to hold an emergency meeting of the LAS at the ministerial level, to discuss the repercussions of the Emirati-Israeli normalization announcement on the Palestine issue.¹⁵⁴

In a related context, Bahrain and Israel inaugurated full diplomatic relations, after an Israeli delegation visited Manama, accompanied by US Secretary of the Treasury Steven Mnuchin, and Special Assistant for International Negotiations Avi Berkowitz. An agreement was signed to launch diplomatic relations, which allows the exchange of embassies and ambassadors and the launch of direct flights, in addition to seven memoranda of understanding in various fields.¹⁵⁵ Bahrain decided to open an embassy in Tel Aviv in March 2021, and appointed Khaled al-Jalahma as the first ambassador of Bahrain to Israel. He was the Director of Operations Department at the Bahraini Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and held the position of Deputy Head of the Kingdom’s Mission to the United States.¹⁵⁶ Al-Jalahma assumed his duties at the end of August 2021.¹⁵⁷



As for the UAE-Israel relations, Israel appointed temporary ambassador to Abu Dhabi, Eitan Na'eh, who was expelled from Turkey when relations between the two countries deteriorated in 2018. Since then, he has not held any position.¹⁵⁸ In parallel, the Israeli Foreign Minister Gabi Ashkenazi appointed former ambassador, Zvi Heifetz, as a special envoy to the Gulf states that signed “peace” agreements with Israel. Heifetz worked in a number of countries, the last of which was China. He was appointed as a special envoy to the UAE and Bahrain. He is entrusted with developing relations with the Gulf states and establishing three diplomatic missions.¹⁵⁹ Indeed, the Israeli Embassy in Abu Dhabi, as well as the Israeli Consulate General in Dubai, were officially opened on 26/1/2021.¹⁶⁰

As for the UAE, Mohamed Al Khaja was sworn in as the first UAE ambassador to Israel,¹⁶¹ and the UAE opened its embassy in Tel Aviv in July 2021, in a festive atmosphere, with a pledge from its ambassador to strengthen the partnership with Israel.¹⁶² Whereas, the Israeli Foreign Ministry appointed Amir Hayek, who previously served as the head of the Israel Hotel Association and the head of the Manufacturers Association of Israel, to replace Eitan Na'eh, the acting ambassador to the UAE.¹⁶³ The appointment of an Israeli economist as ambassador highlights the Israeli aspirations for the relationship with the UAE, and its ambition to reap economic benefits.

The establishment of official diplomatic relations between the UAE and Israel was accompanied by the announcement of the Abraham Fund. “Through this fund, the US International Development Finance Corporation (DFC), the UAE, and Israel will mobilize more than \$3 billion in private sector-led investment and development initiatives to promote regional economic cooperation and prosperity in the Middle East and beyond.”¹⁶⁴

After announcing the establishment of official diplomatic relations, Israeli diplomats revealed to the Israeli press how they had worked secretly in the UAE and Bahrain during the past 20 years. In the past two decades, about 20 Israeli diplomats served in these Gulf countries, even before the establishment of official relations within the framework of the “Abraham Accords.” They lived there with civilian identities, forged identity cards, and participated primarily in creating business opportunities for Israeli companies seeking to strengthen economic relations with the UAE and Bahrain, as well as strengthening political relations.¹⁶⁵

Some Gulf countries tried to play a diplomatic role after the outbreak of the Sword of Jerusalem Battle. Saudi Foreign Minister Faisal bin Farhan affirmed his country's condemnation of the illegal practices carried out by the Israeli occupation authorities, during a phone call with his Palestinian counterpart, Riyad al-Maliki. Bin Farhan said it was necessary to immediately stop Israeli escalatory actions that violate all international norms and covenants.¹⁶⁶ In a telephone conversation with President 'Abbas, Saudi King Salman bin 'Abdul 'Aziz affirmed the KSA's condemnation of the Israeli attacks and measures in the city of Jerusalem, and the Israeli aggression on GS, which resulted in the loss of innocent victims and wounded. He said that the KSA will continue its efforts at all levels to stop the Israeli measures and attacks on Jerusalem, by communicating with the relevant parties to put pressure on the Israeli government. The kingdom later welcomed the declaration of a ceasefire in the GS.¹⁶⁷

In a related context, Mohamed bin Zayed, Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi, expressed the UAE's support of Egyptian efforts to achieve security and stability in the region. He stressed the need to make more efforts, especially by Israeli and Palestinian leaders, stressing the UAE's readiness to work with all parties to preserve a ceasefire, and to explore new paths to reduce escalation and achieve "peace."¹⁶⁸

As for Qatar, Qatari Ambassador Muhammed al-'Emadi, chairman of Qatar's Gaza Reconstruction Committee, announced a new truce agreement in GS between the Palestinian factions and Israel. The agreement provides for the full reopening of the crossings to meet the GS's main needs, with the provision of various facilities, which would help all parties to get out of the tense situation and reduce tension in the region.¹⁶⁹

b. Position on the Internal Palestinian Conflict

The relationship between the KSA and Hamas witnessed more tension, as reflected in the KSA's trial of 68 detained Jordanian and Palestinian activists, on the grounds of sympathy with the Palestinian resistance. The court charged the detainees with "transferring funds illegally and establishing unlicensed organizations."¹⁷⁰

For its part, Human Rights Watch questioned the detainees' access to fair trials, and indicated that after two years of detainees being held without charge, mass trial



behind closed doors began on 8/3/2020, based on vague allegations related to their links with a “terrorist organization” that was not named.¹⁷¹ The Euro-Mediterranean Human Rights Monitor documented shocking testimonies of serious violations against the detainees, including their arbitrary detention since the beginning of 2019, physical torture, isolation and deliberate medical neglect.¹⁷²

In a related context, the KSA rejected the initiative of the Secretary-General of the Yemeni “Ansar Allah” (Houthi) movement, ‘Abdul Malik al-Houthi, to release Hamas detainees, in exchange for the release of Saudi soldiers. The KSA had previously refused Jordanian and Moroccan mediation to close this file on the pretext that it was a “a private issue related to Saudi internal security.”¹⁷³ The Prisoners of Conscience account on Twitter (@m3takl) had revealed that the number of Palestinians detained in Saudi prisons on charges of belonging to Hamas is 160, and that all of them are in Abha prison (southwest of KSA).¹⁷⁴ According to the Arabic Post website, the KSA used the Mossad to interrogate the detainees, in addition to the participation of another team of foreign nationals in the interrogations.¹⁷⁵

In August 2021, the Saudi Criminal Court sentenced one of its most prominent detainees, Muhammad al-Khodari, the former representative of Hamas in the kingdom, to 15 years in prison, on charges of supporting the resistance, among sentences of 69 Jordanians and Palestinians, ranging between acquittal and 22 years in prison.¹⁷⁶

A week after these rulings, new ones were issued against Jordanians and Palestinians in the same file, according to the Prisoners of Conscience, which said that it had received information that a number of Palestinian and Jordanian detainees were tortured, to force them to give information about the resistance in Palestine. They were tortured, beaten on sensitive areas of the body, and some of them lost a significant amount of weight. During the interrogation of some Palestinian and Jordanian detainees, the intelligence services offered them the option to work with the KSA authorities and provide them with information in return for reduced sentences, and then to be released and deported to Jordan.¹⁷⁷

Tensions were not confined to the relationship between Hamas and the KSA. There were also problems in the relationship between the UAE and the rest of the factions, in addition to the PA. After the factions denounced in a meeting the UAE’s normalization of relations with Israel, with ‘Abbas describing it as a stab in

the back of the Palestinian people with a “poisoned dagger,” the Secretary-General of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) demanded ‘Abbas and Palestinian leaders to apologize for what he considered transgressions and provocative and false statements, which in his opinion, contradict the reality and history of relations between the GCC states and the Palestinian people.¹⁷⁸ The PA, and in an attempt to cool the tensions, and according to the Presidential Spokesperson Nabil Abu Rudeineh, declared that ‘Abbas was against attacking the sovereign symbols of other Arab countries.¹⁷⁹

However, the Palestinian leadership’s refusal to apologize, prompted Prince Bandar bin Sultan, the former Saudi ambassador to the US, to attack the Palestinians. He said that the remarks of the Palestinian leaders after the UAE and Bahrain’s agreement with Israel were “painful” and “low,” noting that “the PA leadership attack on the Gulf states is unacceptable.”¹⁸⁰ However, in another place, he said that the ingratitude of the Palestinian leaders and the lack of loyalty “will not affect our attachment to the Palestine issue.”¹⁸¹

The billionaire Emirati businessman Khalaf Al Habtoor declared that the idea of the return of the Palestinian refugees was illogical, publishing an article in the *Haaretz* newspaper in which he wrote, “There is a valid argument that says the Israelis have been intransigent. But the same can also be said for the Palestinians who still insist on the right of return for refugees in Syria, Jordan, Lebanon and elsewhere. Never going to happen, and they know that full well.”¹⁸² The UAE Foreign Minister, ‘Abdullah bin Zayed, in an interview with the American Jewish Committee (AJC) website, said, “It’s been funny when countries designate the same entity its military wing as a terrorist group and its political wing as a non-terrorist group, and then that same entity says there is no difference between our military and political wing.”¹⁸³

In a related context, the UAE Chairman of the Defense, Interior and Foreign Affairs Committee, Ali al-Nuaimi, said that the Palestinians are still living in the past, and demanded that they return to negotiations, stressing that if a war broke out in GS, the relations between the UAE and Israel would not be affected.¹⁸⁴ Indeed, after the outbreak of the Sword of Jerusalem Battle, al-Nuaimi attacked Hamas, in an interview with the *Israel Hayom* newspaper, pointing out that it controls GS and “the Palestinian people in Gaza are suffering because of Hamas, not the Israelis,” accusing Hamas of serving Iranian goals.¹⁸⁵

In contrast to the Saudi-Emirati position against the resistance in Palestine, we find the positive position of Qatar and Kuwait. The new Emir of Kuwait, Nawaf al-Ahmad al-Sabah, stressed, in a telephone conversation with the head of the Hamas political bureau, that Kuwait will remain loyal to the nation's issues, especially the cause of the Palestinian people. He said that Kuwaitis will remain faithful to the legacy of the late Emir and follow him in support of the Palestine issue.¹⁸⁶

Qatar tried to balance its relationship with both sides of the Palestinian equation. In 2020, it provided the PA with medical equipment worth \$10 million for its COVID-19 response.¹⁸⁷ In parallel, it provided the GS with \$150 million in financial support for its COVID-19 response.¹⁸⁸ In 2021, Qatar allocated a financial grant of \$360 million to GS, used to pay the salaries of civil servants, provide financial aid to needy families, and operate power stations.¹⁸⁹ Thus, the total Qatari grants directed to GS through the "Gaza Reconstruction Committee" since its inception in 2012, amounted to about \$1,422.4 million.¹⁹⁰

At the beginning of 2021, an agreement was signed with the Israeli company Delek, to transport gas to the power station in GS with funding from the EU and Qatar. Doha pledged to provide \$60 million, while the EU pledged to provide \$24 million, in order to finance the project.¹⁹¹ Following the Sword of Jerusalem Battle, Qatar distributed urgent relief aid to the families of those killed and those affected by the war in GS.¹⁹² A few days later, Doha pledged \$500 million in support for the reconstruction of GS,¹⁹³ as Qatar and Kuwait pledged to rebuild residential buildings, while Egypt pledged to provide \$500 million for separate reconstruction operations in GS.¹⁹⁴

For their part, KSA and the UAE pledged their support through UNRWA. The KSA pledged \$1 million to support UNRWA's efforts to combat COVID-19 in GS,¹⁹⁵ in addition to \$25 million to UNRWA through the Saudi Embassy in Jordan. According to UNRWA, the KSA donated \$50 million in 2018 to help fill the shortfall resulting from the US administration's decision to withhold funding for the agency.¹⁹⁶

An Israeli report issued by the Center for Near East Policy stated that the UAE and Bahrain, since they signed "peace" agreements with Israel, reduced their financial support to UNRWA. According to the report, the UAE in 2018 alone contributed \$53 million to UNRWA, but in 2019 contributed \$51 million, and 2020, only \$1 million.¹⁹⁷

c. Position on the Peace Process

Kuwait implicitly rejected the Deal of the Century plan, when the Kuwaiti Foreign Ministry stated that a just and comprehensive solution to the Palestine issue could only be achieved by adhering to the relevant resolutions of international legitimacy, and the references established by the international community, led by the establishment of an independent, sovereign [Palestinian] state on the borders of June 4, 1967, with East Jerusalem as its capital.¹⁹⁸ For its part, the GCC condemned Israel's plans to annex any part of the occupied Palestinian territories, stressing the firm position of the Gulf states on the Palestine issue, considering it the prime Arab and Muslim issue. The GCC, also affirmed its support for the permanent sovereignty of the Palestinian people over all their occupied lands since June 1967, and the establishment of their independent state with its capital, East Jerusalem.¹⁹⁹

US President Trump announced an agreement to normalize all relations between Israel and the UAE. Abu Dhabi Crown Prince Mohamed bin Zayed wrote on Twitter, "During a call with President Trump and Prime Minister Netanyahu, an agreement was reached to stop further Israeli annexation of Palestinian territories. The UAE and Israel also agreed to cooperation and setting a roadmap towards establishing a bilateral relationship." However, in a TV address, Netanyahu said, "he had 'delayed' West Bank annexation plans, but those plans remain 'on the table.'" White House Adviser Jared Kushner had revealed that the talks that lasted for a year and a half culminated in an agreement to normalize relations between Israel and the UAE. The UAE Embassy in Washington also wrote on Twitter, "The UAE and Israel will join with the US to launch a 'Strategic Agenda for the Middle East.' This will deepen diplomatic, commercial and security cooperation together and with other countries committed to peace and non-interference." and added, "The UAE will remain a strong supporter of the Palestinian people – for their dignity, their rights and their own sovereign state. They must benefit from normalization. We will forcefully advocate for these ends."²⁰⁰

UAE Minister of State for Foreign Affairs Anwar Gargash said, "an agreement with Israel to normalise relations was done to deal with the threat that further annexation of Palestinian territories posed to the two-state solution, as this would eliminate any hopes for peace in the region." He further called on the Palestinians and Israelis to return to negotiations.²⁰¹ Despite this, Netanyahu declared, during



his announcement of the “peace agreement” with the UAE, that there is no change in the annexation scheme, saying “he would continue to seek to extend Israeli sovereignty to parts of the West Bank land, in coordination with the US,” noting that the real “peace” as he sees, is a peace that maintains security (Israel’s security) and “the important things for our people.” Netanyahu added, a peace that distances war and does not bring it closer. A peace based on solid economic cooperation, and mutual respect. Real peace, not a slogan ... a peace for peace.²⁰²

Concerning the KSA, there are apparent differences between the wings of the Saudi state towards concluding a “peace” agreement with Israel and normalization. Prince Turki al-Faisal, the former Saudi intelligence chief, described “all Israeli government, are the last of the Western colonizing parts of the Middle East” that “they have forcibly evicted the inhabitants of Palestine after the 1948 war. They burned villages of Palestinian to the ground.” He accused Israel of depicting itself as a “small, existentially threatened country, surrounded by bloodthirsty killers who want to eradicate her from existence,” “And yet they profess that they want to be friends with Saudi Arabia.” Al-Faisal stressed that he was speaking in a private capacity, and expressed his doubts about the peace agreements signed by Gulf states with Israel, saying “you cannot treat an open wound with palliatives and painkillers,” adding that only “through the Arab Peace Initiative will we be able to confront Iran, and the Abraham Accords cannot be called as such without the Saudi Arabia’s participation.”²⁰³

However, Jared Kushner statements indicated that there are parties in the Saudi state in favor of a “peace” agreement with Israel, saying, “Israel and Saudi Arabia coming together and having full normalization at this point is an inevitability, but the timeframe... is something that has to be worked out.”²⁰⁴

In the same context, *Yedioth Ahronoth* newspaper revealed that the Saudi Crown Prince, Muhammed bin Salman, was a full partner in secret from the beginning of the Abraham Accords between the UAE and Israel, pointing out that his good relationship with Jared Kushner, and with the ruler of the Emirates, Mohamed bin Zayed, led in recent days to applying double pressure, but he insisted that the UAE be first in line.²⁰⁵

On a related note, King Salman bin ‘Abdul ‘Aziz, before the 75th session of the UN General Assembly, affirmed KSA’s traditional position of accepting “peace” based on the Arab Peace Initiative, declaring:

Peace in the Middle East is our strategic option. Our duty is to spare no effort to work together towards achieving a bright future where peace, stability, prosperity, and coexistence among all the region's peoples prevail. The Kingdom supports all efforts to advance the peace process. The Kingdom introduced peace initiatives since 1981. The 2002 Arab Peace Initiative provides the basis for a comprehensive and just solution to the Arab-Israeli conflict that ensures that the fraternal Palestinian people obtain their legitimate rights, at the forefront of which is establishing their independent state with East Jerusalem as its capital. We support the efforts of the current U.S. administration to achieve peace in the Middle East by bringing the Palestinians and the Israelis to the negotiation table to reach a fair and comprehensive agreement.²⁰⁶

Meanwhile, Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Faisal bin Farhan affirmed that peace between the Kingdom and Israel depends on the establishment of a Palestinian state with its capital East Jerusalem.²⁰⁷

The UAE and Bahrain had signed a “peace” agreement with Israel at the White House, in a ceremony attended by several ambassadors to the US, including the ambassador of the Sultanate of Oman and the deputy ambassador of Sudan. In his speech, Trump said, “We’re here this afternoon to change the course of history. After decades of division and conflict, we mark the dawn of a new Middle East... In Israel’s entire history, there have previously been only two such agreements. Now we have achieved two in a single month, and there are more to follow.” He added, “Israel, the United Arab Emirates, and Bahrain will establish embassies, exchange ambassadors, and begin to cooperate — and work together so strongly to cooperate as partners across the broad range of sectors, from tourism to trade, and healthcare to security.” He also said, “The Abraham Accords also open the door for Muslims around the world to visit the historic sites in Israel and to peacefully pray at *Al-Aqsa* Mosque in Jerusalem, the third holiest site in Islam.”²⁰⁸ UAE Foreign Minister ‘Abdullah bin Zayed commented on the signing of the agreement by saying that normalization with Israel shows that peoples are fed up with conflicts and desire stability.²⁰⁹

The 41st GCC summit reaffirmed its commitment to the Arab Peace Initiative and stressed the centrality of the Palestine issue.²¹⁰ Qatar and Kuwait differed from the rest of the Gulf states in their refusal to normalize with Israel before resolving the conflict with the Palestinians. Qatar confirmed this in a statement by Lolwah



Alkhatir, Assistant Foreign Minister of Qatar, noting that normalization with Israel cannot be the solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, but the solution lies in implementing Security Council resolutions, granting the Palestinians their rights, and finding a just solution to their cause.²¹¹

The Kuwaiti government stressed the centrality of the Palestine issue as it is the first Arab and Muslim issue, and the State of Kuwait's commitment to stand by the Palestinian people and support their options. It reaffirmed its support of all efforts aimed at reaching a just and comprehensive solution to the Palestine issue, which would guarantee ending the occupation, the return of refugees, and the establishment of an independent state, with East Jerusalem as its capital, on the borders of June 4, 1967, in accordance with international legitimacy resolutions, the Arab Peace Initiative and the two-state solution.²¹²

The White House published excerpts from the Emirati and Bahraini normalization agreement with Israel. The agreement includes general terms stressing the importance of strengthening and preserving “peace” in the Middle East, based on mutual understanding and existence, and respect for human dignity, freedom and religious freedom. It contains 12 points that revolve around the establishment of diplomatic “peace” relations, and the full normalization of relations between the two countries, in accordance with the UN laws and international law. They would take steps to prevent any “terrorist” or violent activities against each of the two countries and deny any support for such activities abroad. In addition, it stipulates enhancing cooperation by concluding agreements covering: Finance and Investment, Civil Aviation, Visas and Consular Services, Innovation, Trade and Economic Relations, Healthcare, Science, Technology and Peaceful Uses of Outer-Space, Tourism, Culture and Sport, Energy, Environment, Education, Maritime Arrangements, Telecommunications and Post, Agriculture and Food Security, Water; and Legal Cooperation.²¹³

d. Relations with Israel:

Political and Diplomatic Aspect

The position of the Gulf states regarding Israel varied. While the UAE and Bahrain went a long way in normalizing with Israel, there were conflicting signals from the KSA between rejection and acceptance, and the same can be said of Oman. Kuwait was characterized by its rejection of normalization, and to a lesser extent the Qatari position.

The pace of normalization between the UAE, Bahrain and Israel accelerated after the signing of the Abraham Accords. Bahraini Foreign Minister ‘Abdullatif bin Rashid al-Zayani met with US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and Netanyahu in west Jerusalem, where he announced, on this first-ever visit of a Gulf foreign minister to Israel, the exchange of embassies, and the expansion of normalization agreements between the two countries.²¹⁴ In the same context, Israeli President Reuven Rivlin sent an official invitation to Abu Dhabi Crown Prince Mohamed bin Zayed to visit Jerusalem, days after the official announcement of the relationship between Israel and the UAE.²¹⁵ In mid-December 2021, at the invitation of the Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi, Bennett arrived to the UAE, which was the first official visit by an Israeli head of government to the UAE.²¹⁶

The state of normalization was then “legalized” in the Emirates, with a decree issued to abolish Federal Law No. 15 of 1972 regarding the boycott of Israel and the penalties resulting from it. The abolition of the law allows individuals and companies in the Emirates to conclude agreements with bodies or individuals residing in Israel or holding its nationality.²¹⁷ Meanwhile, The Times of Israel reported that Bahrain, after signing a normalization agreement with Israel, does not have to abolish its law mandating the boycotting of Israel, having already formally withdrew its boycott of the Israeli state some 15 years ago, a short while after signing a free-trade agreement with the US in 2004. Then Bahraini Finance Minister Ahmed bin Mohammed Al Khalifa said that “Bahrain recognizes the need to withdraw the primary boycott against Israel and is developing the means to achieve this.”²¹⁸

The UAE and Bahrain worked to strengthen diplomatic relations with Israel, exchanging congratulations with Israel on the Hebrew New Year (*Rosh Hashanah*).²¹⁹ As an attempt to gain the approval of the Zionist parties, and in an unprecedented Arab move, the UAE Foreign Minister visited the Holocaust memorial in Berlin, where he met his Israeli counterpart.²²⁰ As a means of strengthening relations at the personal level between the leaders of countries, the Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi, Mohamed bin Zayed, received a phone call from Netanyahu, in which bin Zayed stressed that the UAE is keen to make all efforts to achieve “peace,” stability and development that would be in the interest of everyone without exception.²²¹

The UAE used the normalization agreement with Israel to enhance its security capabilities and deepen its relations with the US, with the UAE Foreign Ministry



expecting closer security cooperation between the UAE, on the one hand, and Israel and the US, on the other.²²² The UAE Foreign Minister Gargash stated that his country's agreement with Israel to normalize relations should remove any obstacle for the US to sell F-35 fighters to his country.²²³ However, Israeli Minister of Settlements Affairs Tzachi Hanegbi ruled out the UAE's obtaining the F-35 stealth aircraft regardless of the normalization agreement with the UAE, stating, "We oppose the sale of even one screw of one plane of the stealth fighters to any country in the Middle East, if we have peace with them or not. That's our position, and it has been presented in the past and has been clarified in recent weeks."²²⁴

But the Mossad's position was the opposite, as the *Yedioth Ahronoth* newspaper revealed that the Mossad was pushing Israeli leaders, to sell advanced weapon systems and highly classified information to the UAE. The newspaper reported that the shift to sell Israeli weapons to the UAE took place after the assassination of the Hamas leader, Mahmud al-Mabhouh in Dubai in 2010. A deep schism formed between the two countries, forcing Israel to try to contain the damage, sending the head of the Mossad at the time, Tamir Pardo, to the UAE, with "the intention of mending the relationship, which was conditioned on an Israeli agreement to sell a number of weapons to the UAE."²²⁵

Relations between the Emirates and Israel became briefly tense, following Tzachi Hanegbi's statement about the sale of US planes to the Emirates, forcing Israel to clarify its position with remarks from Netanyahu and Defense Minister Benny Gantz, in a joint statement that Israel would not oppose the sale of F-35 planes to the Emirates.²²⁶

Israel was keen to deny its opposition to the sale of the F-35 planes, stemming from its desire not to sabotage the emerging alliance with the normalizing countries. Israeli Intelligence Minister Eli Cohen stated, "We are currently under the US umbrella building a Sudanese, Emirati, Egyptian and Jordanian alliance, and we expect other countries in the region to join this alliance."²²⁷ It is clear that one of the primary goals of this alliance is to counter Iranian influence in the region, and as an indication of this we can cite the GCC condemnation of the attack on the Israeli oil tanker off Oman, which Israel accused Iran of being behind.²²⁸

Normalization between the two sides took a religious turn, when a new Jewish organization was established in the six Gulf states run by the Israeli Ministry of

Foreign Affairs, comprising the UAE, Bahrain, Oman, KSA, Qatar and Kuwait, with the aim of providing religious services to Jews living in these Gulf countries, whether for residence or tourism.²²⁹ In this context, AJC opened an office in Abu Dhabi.²³⁰ Bahrain also announced the return of prayer and hymns to the Jewish synagogue in the heart of the capital, Manama, for the first time since 1947.²³¹

There were conflicting reports regarding the possibility of announcing normalization between the KSA and Israel. In this regard, the Israeli press revealed secret contacts between the KSA and Israel in the context of the Deal of the Century, with the aim of giving the KSA a role in managing the Islamic endowments in occupied Jerusalem, foremost of which is the *al-Aqsa* Mosque compound, and integrating Saudi delegates in the “board of directors” of the endowments in occupied Jerusalem.²³²

During an interview with Cable News Network (CNN), Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Faisal bin Farhan said, “I think normalizing Israel’s status within the region would bring tremendous benefit to the region as a whole,” adding, “It would be extremely helpful both economically but also socially and from a security perspective.” However, he clarified earlier, “the focus now needs to be on getting the Palestinians and the Israelis back to the negotiating table. In the end, the only thing that can deliver lasting peace and lasting stability is an agreement between the Palestinians and the Israelis.”²³³

The presence of a “common enemy” represented by Iran is pushing for the normalization of relations between the two countries, even if not officially announced. The Israeli Regional Cooperation Minister Issawi Frej revealed that there are contacts with Gulf countries, including KSA, regarding the Iranian file.²³⁴ But this does not mean that the KSA has surrendered all its cards. In an indication of the Saudi regime’s reluctance to fully engage in a relationship with Israel, KSA amended import rules from other member GCC states, to exclude goods produced in free zones, or that use Israeli components, from preferential customs privileges.²³⁵ This poses a challenge to the UAE, which has concluded trade agreements with Israel, and indicates a differentiation between the Saudi and Emirati position on normalization, as it is a veiled sign that no Saudi final decision existed regarding official normalization with Israel.

As for Kuwait, it announced that its position on normalization with Israel was firm, and will not change, and that it will be the last country to do so.²³⁶ The



government's strong rejection of normalization is based on the public's position, reflected in the National Assembly. Several Assembly members, led by Assembly Speaker Marzouq al-Ghanem, submitted a request to expedite proposed laws submitted to the Assembly committees on the "boycott of Israel and the prohibition of dealing or normalization with the Zionist entity."²³⁷ Indeed, the Kuwaiti National Assembly approved further penalties for normalization with Israel.²³⁸ After some press reports said there is pressure on Kuwait to normalize, the Emir of Kuwait, Sheikh Nawaf al-Ahmad al-Sabah affirmed Kuwait's firm and supportive position for the Palestine issue in all international forums, saying that Kuwait will continue to follow in the footsteps of the late Emir concerning Palestine and its people.²³⁹ In conjunction, the Kuwaiti Ministry of Commerce and Industry announced the closure of a store that was selling Israeli products, in violation of the law and regulations on dealing with Israeli products.²⁴⁰ Then Minister of Public Works, Rana al-Fares, also issued a decision banning the entry of commercial ships carrying goods to and from Israel into Kuwait's territorial waters.²⁴¹

The Qatari position intersects with the Kuwaiti position. Qatari Foreign Minister Muhammad bin 'Abdulrahman said in a television interview, "We are waiting for our turn in normalization if Israel commits to the Arab Peace Initiative, ends the occupation, establishes a Palestinian state with East Jerusalem as its capital, and returns the refugees... and the State of Qatar will follow this path, but now we don't see any reason [to normalize]."²⁴²

As for Oman, we find that the regime has not settled its position towards normalization. On the one hand, the Sultanate of Oman welcomed Bahrain's initiative to normalize with Israel, and said in a statement that it hoped that this new strategic direction, chosen by some Arab countries, would be a practical contribution to achieve "peace," based on ending the Israeli occupation of the Palestinian territories and establishing an independent state of Palestine with East Jerusalem as its capital.²⁴³ On the other hand, the Grand Mufti of the Sultanate of Oman, Ahmad bin Hamad al-Khalili, attacked what he described as courtship with the enemy and the issuance of fatwas that would subjugate the nation, in light of the Arab countries' scramble for normalization with the Israeli occupation.²⁴⁴ After that, Omani Foreign Minister Badr al-Busaidi declared that his country would not be the third Gulf country to normalize with Israel.²⁴⁵

The Security Aspect

Security relations between the UAE, Bahrain and Israel strengthened, by signing public security agreements, concluding deals to purchase arms and conducting joint military exercises. The US declared that the goal of strengthening security cooperation between the parties was to counter Iran's influence in the region. Then-US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo revealed that the UAE and Israel had reached an agreement to form an alliance against Iran, saying that "the UAE and Israel both recognize Iran as this great threat."²⁴⁶ The Bahraini Minister of Interior stated that the agreement to establish diplomatic relations with Israel comes within the framework of protecting the supreme interests of the Kingdom of Bahrain, which means protecting the entity of the state...This does not mean abandoning the Palestine issue and the legitimate rights of the Palestinian people, but is meant to enhance the security and economy of the Bahrainis...If Palestine is our Arab cause, then Bahrain is our fateful cause.²⁴⁷

Bahrain's Crown Prince Salman bin Hamad Al Khalifa stated during talks with Netanyahu that supporting "peace" with Israel enhances security, stability and prosperity in the region.²⁴⁸ The UAE confirmed the same stance, on the sidelines of a meeting in Cyprus that brought together Israeli Foreign Minister Gabi Ashkenazi with Anwar Gargash, the diplomatic advisor to the President of the UAE. Gargash stated that "ties with Israel amounted to an 'alternative strategic view' aimed at bolstering regional security."²⁴⁹

Israel benefited economically from the security agreements by concluding several deals to sell Israeli arms. The UAE resorted to Israel to strengthen the air defense of its ally in Libya, Khalifa Haftar, in order to confront the drone system of the Libyan Government of National Accord (GNA), supported by Turkey.²⁵⁰ The UAE IDEX International Defense Exhibition and Conference signed a strategic agreement, with the Defense, National Security and Cyber Security Exhibition in Israel ISDEF, to participate in the exhibition held in the capital Abu Dhabi in mid-February 2021, and promote Israeli defense, security and technology companies.²⁵¹ Furthermore, the *Calcalist* newspaper reported that "Israeli cybersecurity companies were active in the UAE through their international branches even before the countries agreed to establish full diplomatic relations this past summer." However, Mohammad al-Kuwaiti, the Executive Director of the UAE's National Electronic Security Authority (NESA) said that this



“activity has intensified significantly since the Abraham Accords were signed.”²⁵² In this context, the Israeli newspaper *Globes* reported that the Israeli company, Percepto, had installed drones in the UAE to monitor oil fields, solar farms and other infrastructure. The drones are used for security purposes and to identify malfunctions in real time.²⁵³

The meetings and security contacts between the two sides then became public. After the visit of Mossad Chief Yossi Cohen to the UAE in August 2020, he left for Bahrain to meet with officials there.²⁵⁴ Meanwhile, Israeli Defense Minister Benny Gantz had a phone conversation with his Emirati counterpart, Mohammed bin Ahmed Al Bowardi, during which they discussed strengthening security cooperation and channels of communication and establishing solid bilateral relations.²⁵⁵ In October 2020, the Mossad chief also held security talks in Bahrain.²⁵⁶

Abu Dhabi hosted a virtual meeting of the interior ministers of the countries of the International Security Alliance, in the presence of the representative of Israel. The alliance includes the UAE, France, Italy, Spain, Slovakia, Senegal, Singapore, the Kingdom of Bahrain and the Kingdom of Morocco, in addition to Israel, which has officially joined it.²⁵⁷

The two sides “legalized” their security relations by signing joint agreements, as a Bahraini-Israeli agreement on joint security cooperation was announced,²⁵⁸ in addition the UAE’s advanced technology group for defence and beyond EDGE agreed on a memorandum of understanding (MoU) with Israel Aerospace Industries (IAI) to develop an advanced C-UAS Counter-Unmanned Aircraft System (C-UAS).²⁵⁹ Meanwhile, the Hebrew Walla! website revealed that Israel and the UAE had agreed to appoint a permanent representative of the Israeli police to the UAE, and vice versa.²⁶⁰ This was followed by the signing of an MOU in the field of “fighting money laundering and terrorist financing” between the UAE and Israel.²⁶¹

In terms of joint training, Emirati and Israeli fighter jets participated in joint exercises in Greece, as part of the joint exercise dubbed Iniochos.²⁶² The UAE, represented by the Commander of the Air Force, also participated in the international “Blue Flag” exercise, which was held by Israel in the Negev desert in October 2021, with the participation of many countries.²⁶³ In addition, a joint naval exercise was held between the UAE, Bahrain, Israel and the United States in November 2021, in the Red Sea, with the focus of training on “on visit, board,

search and seizure tactics.” It is believed that the move can “create the potential for a regional coalition with Arab countries that have normalized ties with Israel against shared threats posed by Iran.”²⁶⁴

The Commercial and Economic Aspect

Trade and economic normalization between some Gulf states and Israel deepened in several areas. In addition to signing joint trade agreements and drawing up plans for future projects, trade between ports, banking transactions, and oil and gas supplies have been institutionalized, with the import of Israeli products. In addition, economic relations were strengthened by allowing Israel to participate in various trade fairs, and in various fields, most notably high-tech, which resulted in an increase in the trade volume between the two parties. The customs ports in the UAE allowed the entry of Israeli products or any goods imported from Israel, as well as the export of Emirati products or any goods exported from the Emirates to the Israeli ports.²⁶⁵

Several agreements were also signed between the two parties. The Tel Aviv Chamber of Commerce (TACC) has signed an agreement with the Abu Dhabi Chamber of Commerce and Industry (ADCCI), where both sides will jointly work to extend cooperation in a number of investment sectors including tourism, technologies, agriculture, medicine and digital professions.²⁶⁶ Meanwhile, the Jebel Ali Free Zone (Jafza) and the Federation of Israeli Chambers of Commerce (FICC) signed an MOU to build new partnerships and strengthen commercial relations, as well as sharing information that serve economic relations, including regulations and plans, and possibilities in terms of economic planning.²⁶⁷ The UAE and Israel signed four MOUs in Israel concerning irrigation solutions and advanced agriculture, which would further strengthen cooperation and strategic partnership between the two countries.²⁶⁸

It also signed several agreements with Israel to support cooperation in the fields of investment, tourism, banking and technology between the two countries. The signed agreements included an investment protection and promotion agreement, aviation services agreement, a visa exemption agreement, and an MOU on cooperation in the areas of improving and developing science and technology.²⁶⁹ Meanwhile, the two export credit agencies of UAE and Israel signed a cooperation agreement to develop economic relations between the two countries, broadening the export financing possibilities for their exporters.²⁷⁰ The UAE also signed a



tax agreement with Israel aimed at bolstering economic ties between the two sides. The agreement provides “certainty and favorable conditions for extensive business activity,” according to Israel Katz, the Israeli Finance Minister.²⁷¹ The UAE and Israel signed an economic cooperation agreement, in which the two governments commit to open up economic relations, a free flow of goods and services, cooperation on trade fairs, exchange of experts and know how, exchange of delegations, cooperation on standards and regulation, encouragement of cooperation by the private sector, encouragement of Research and Development, agritech and more. The agreement provides for the formation of a joint economic committee, led by the Ministries of Economy of both countries, to examine ways of increasing trade and removing trade barriers.²⁷²

The UAE announced the establishment of a \$10 billion fund to invest in Israel, aimed at investing in strategic sectors in Israel, including energy, manufacturing, water, space, health care, agricultural technology and others.²⁷³ Meanwhile, a Jerusalem municipality official revealed Emirati “willingness and enthusiasm” to invest in the settlement scheme, which is intended to Judaize large parts of the Jerusalem neighborhoods, Wadi al-Joz, Sheikh Jarrah and Musrara, by converting large areas of them into an investment center in a project known as “Silicon Wadi.” The scheme is based on the ruins of about 200 commercial and industrial facilities in the industrial area in the Jerusalem neighborhood of Wadi al-Joz. The first phase of the plan targets more than 250 donums of the Jerusalem neighborhoods adjacent to the Old City.²⁷⁴

The Emirati and Israeli sides worked to overcome the obstacles to trade through their ports. The DP World group signed three memoranda of understanding with the Israeli company DoverTower, which cover areas of cooperation, where “DP World will assess the development of Israeli ports and free zones, and the potential establishment of a direct shipping route between Eilat and Jebel Ali.” In addition, “Dubai Customs will promote and facilitate trade between private entities in the two countries through customs best practice and seamless, innovative processes,” and “Drydocks World will explore business opportunities with Israel Shipyards Ltd (ISL) on a joint venture for developing, manufacturing and marketing ISL products.”²⁷⁵ DP World signed an MOU with the Israeli Bank Leumi, “to work together to enhance trade and logistics in Israel and promote the flow of trade between Israel and the wider region.” The MOU includes a framework for cooperation which would:

enable the parties to explore potential opportunities including the development of ports and logistics assets in Israel to drive trade and greater job creation; trade finance solutions to simplify working capital requirements for customers improve flow of cargo; and digital solutions in end-to-end logistics to remove inefficiencies in the supply chain.²⁷⁶

A maritime line between Israel and the UAE was inaugurated on 12/10/2020, with the first container ship coming directly from the Emirates arriving at the Haifa port in Israel, which would then sail on a line linking India and the UAE with the Haifa port, and then to the ports of the US east.²⁷⁷ After the container ship arrived, then Prime Minister Netanyahu toured the pier at Haifa port where the container ship from the UAE is anchored and said:

It is important to understand, once Israel was a cul-de-sac, meaning that you could come here from the west and leave; you could not fly or sail. In effect, you were constrained. Now, Israel is becoming a main hub, both maritime and in the air. It is possible to fly in all directions, over Saudi Arabia and Jordan. This is a land, sea, air, technological, commercial and human hub. This is a very big thing. This is a historic day, genuinely historic. This is the second visit to Israel of a ship from Dubai that has anchored in Haifa port.²⁷⁸

In the same context, Israel announced joining the World Logistics Passport (WLP), an international initiative established and led by Dubai, which aims to increase the volume of trade in the world's markets, by reducing shipping costs and reducing transit time, through the first global freight loyalty program.²⁷⁹

As trade between the two sides needs banking transactions, they also engaged in banking normalization. The Governor of the UAE Central Bank and the Director General of the Israeli Prime Minister's Office signed an MOU for future cooperation in the financial and banking sector.²⁸⁰ The Israeli Bank Leumi signed an MOU with the First Abu Dhabi Bank and Emirates NBD, a day after Emirates NBD signed an MOU with Bank Hapoalim.²⁸¹ The Dubai International Finance Center (DIFC) and Israel's Bank Hapoalim signed an agreement under which Bank Hapoalim would become "part of DIFC's global network of banks, financial centres, regulators and companies that are disrupting the financial and technology sectors."²⁸² The DIFC FinTech Hive technology hub signed an agreement with the Israeli Fintech Aviv, which will enable DIFC to further support the UAE in facilitating economic growth from the technology and innovation sectors.²⁸³ The



two largest banks in Israel, Bank Leumi and Bank Hapoalim, signed two MOUs with the National Bank of Bahrain, under which the two parties agreed to work together to provide customers with the required banking information between the two countries, as well as trade, clearing, investment, foreign currency and security trading.²⁸⁴

Regarding oil and gas, in October 2020, the Israeli Europe Asia Pipeline Company (EAPC) signed a preliminary deal with MED-RED Land Bridge, a company with Israeli and Emirati owners, to help transport oil from the UAE to Europe via a pipeline that connects Eilat and the Mediterranean port of Ashkelon. It could provide quicker access for consumers in Asia to oil produced in the Mediterranean and Black Sea regions.²⁸⁵ In April 2021, the first vessel offloaded its crude in Ashkelon port to be pumped through the EAPC pipeline network on a 242-kilometer journey to the port of Eilat where it was loaded onto a Very large crude carrier (VLCC) heading to the Far East via the Red Sea.²⁸⁶ In a related context, Israel's Delek Drilling, which owns 22% of the Tamar natural gas field in the Mediterranean, sold its stake to the Emirati company Mubadala Petroleum for a value of \$1.025 billion.²⁸⁷

High-tech deals became public. A huge Israeli delegation participated in the GITEX event for information technology in the UAE. The Israeli delegation also participated in the Future Digital Economy Summit on the sidelines of GITEX.²⁸⁸ In addition, the Israeli company Beacon Red, owned by a former head of Mossad, announced signing a strategic agreement with the UAE company XM Cyber, to further enhance its vulnerability assessment and penetration testing (VAPT) services provided to government and critical infrastructure clients in the UAE and across the GCC region.²⁸⁹ It was also announced that Group 42 (G42), a leading technology company based in Abu Dhabi, and Rafael Advanced Defense Systems of Israel signed “an agreement to form a new Joint Venture (JV) that will commercialize Artificial Intelligence (AI) and Big Data technologies and solutions for multiple sectors,” such as, banking, healthcare, public safety and others, to be sold in Israel, the UAE and worldwide.²⁹⁰

The normalizing Arab countries did not care about the origin of the goods they imported from Israel, even if they were produced in settlements established in Palestinian Territories Occupied in 1967. In this regard, an Anadolu Agency investigation revealed that Emirati companies contracted with Israeli companies

blacklisted by the UN, for supporting illegal settlements in the occupied West Bank. The “blacklist” includes 112 Israeli and international companies.²⁹¹ The UAE also signed an agreement with an Israeli company to market wine made in the occupied Syrian Golan Heights.²⁹²

A delegation of businessmen from Israeli settlements visited Dubai to establish economic partnerships. The settlement delegation, consisting of directors of factories, companies and businessmen from the industrial zones of the settlement council, met with about 20 Emirati businessmen, owners of companies specializing in the fields of agriculture, pesticides and plastics, and managers of big investment companies. The two sides discussed bilateral cooperation, especially in the fields of agricultural crops and water desalination.²⁹³

As an affirmation of this Emirati trend, the head of the Dubai Chamber of Commerce and Industry (DCCI) announced that his country will deal with goods produced in the settlements established on Palestinian lands in the occupied WB as imports from Israel, saying that the UAE does not distinguish between Israeli imports manufactured in different regions, including “Judea and Samaria,” using the Israeli designation for the occupied WB.²⁹⁴ On 7/12/2020, an agreement was also signed to export settlement products in the northern WB to the UAE, the Israeli products included honey-producers, wineries, olive oil and tahini.²⁹⁵ After that, it did not take long for the UAE to receive the first official shipment of products from Israeli settlements built on the Palestinian territories occupied in 1967.²⁹⁶

In the same vein, the Bahraini Minister of Trade, Industry and Tourism Zayed bin Rashid al-Zayani stated that his country will treat Israeli products as Israeli regardless of their origin,²⁹⁷ meaning it will not distinguish between the products of the settlements and Israel proper. This statement caused an uproar, prompting Bahraini Foreign Minister ‘Abdullatif bin Rashid al-Zayani to contact his Palestinian counterpart and deny what had been attributed to the Bahraini Minister of Commerce.²⁹⁸

The volume of trade between the UAE and Israel has increased because of the normalization of relations. After the announcement of the normalization of relations between the UAE and Israel, Israeli Intelligence Minister Eli Cohen expected that the annual trade between them would reach \$4 billion within 3–5 years.²⁹⁹ Netanyahu stated that the “peace” agreements with the UAE and Bahrain would generate billions of dollars for the Israeli economy, strengthen Israel



in general, and help it face the economic damage caused by the repercussions of the coronavirus.³⁰⁰

Economic normalization led to the revival of the Israeli diamond industry. According to a report published by the Israeli Ministry of Economy and Industry for the first quarter of 2021, the net import of rough diamonds to Israel amounted to about \$476 million, an increase of 75% compared to the same period in 2020.³⁰¹

6. Sudan, Morocco and other Arab Countries

a. Sudan

Sudanese-Israeli relations began to publicly emerge in February 2020, when the head of the Transitional Sovereign Council, ‘Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, met with Netanyahu in Uganda. The Israeli media reported that the meeting was arranged by the UAE and with the aim of “accelerating” the process of removing Sudan from the “State Sponsors of Terrorism list.”³⁰² According to the Israeli sources, Netanyahu asked al-Burhan to open Sudanese airspace to Israeli flights coming from Latin America, while al-Burhan requested Israel’s mediation to ease US sanctions on his country and remove it from the “State Sponsors of Terrorism list.”³⁰³ It seems that the meeting took place without consulting the Sudanese government. The Minister of Culture, Information and Tourism, and the spokesperson for the transitional government, Faisal Muhammad Saleh, stated that “we were not notified or consulted in the Council of Ministers about the meeting, and we will wait for clarifications after the return of the President of the Sovereign Council.”³⁰⁴ But normalization then began immediately. After the Uganda meeting, Netanyahu announced that he had obtained permission for Israeli civilian planes to fly over Sudan.³⁰⁵

Al-Burhan tried to justify his meeting with Netanyahu by saying that this would contribute to Sudan’s integration into the international community, declaring that “contacts with Netanyahu and Pompeo began three months ago, and we discussed what can benefit Sudan.” He explained that he had informed Prime Minister ‘Abdallah Hamdok of the Entebbe meeting two days before it was scheduled, stressing that the Forces for Freedom and Change had no objection to the step, but that their objection came because of the lack of consultation prior to the meeting. As for aviation collaboration, al-Burhan indicated that some airlines had for months been crossing Sudan’s airspace on the way to Israel, claiming that

Sudan's rapprochement with Israel may be useful in "helping the Palestinians solve their problems." Following these statements, the Sudanese army announced its support for al-Burhan, stressing that his meeting with Netanyahu comes within the framework of Sudan's supreme interest.³⁰⁶

Sudanese steps towards normalization were manifested by allowing commercial flights to fly to Israel through its airspace, where in March 2020, LATAM, Latin America's largest airline group, was allowed to fly over Sudan in its direct flights between South America and Israel.³⁰⁷ Several months later, in June 2020, an El Al plane flying from Argentina crossed through Sudan's airspace, the first Israeli airliner to do so.³⁰⁸ In June 2020, press reports revealed that an Israeli plane crossed Sudanese airspace on its way to the Chadian capital, N'Djamena, on the first direct flight from Israel to Chad.³⁰⁹

Disagreements on the issue of normalization within the Transitional Sovereign Council became public. This was exemplified by the Foreign Ministry's dismissal of its spokesperson, Haider Badawi Sadiq, after he stated that contacts were taking place between Sudan and Israel to normalize relations, praising the agreement announced between the UAE and Israel, describing it as a "brave and bold step." Sadiq added that it in the event of signing a "peace" agreement, Sudan "will be the most important country with which Israel normalizes, even more important than Egypt," stressing that "peace between Israel and the Arab countries helps the world achieve international peace."³¹⁰

Hamdok tried to manoeuvre with regard to seeking an agreement with Israel, by informing his guest, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, that his government did not have a mandate beyond the tasks of the transitional phase, and that normalization with Israel should be discussed after the completion of the transitional governance structures.³¹¹ Similarly, the Sudanese Minister of Culture, Information and Tourism Faisal Mohamed Salih stated that the delegation that visited the UAE and met the US administration team there "does not have a mandate to discuss normalization with Israel." He stressed that his country's position "is consistent regarding normalization with Israel, and we do not have a mandate to take a decision in such matters, as they are among the tasks of an elected government, and we still hold the same position."³¹²

The government's refusal to sign a normalization agreement prompted some parties to warn of the disintegration of the ruling coalition, comprised of the



military and civilians represented by the “Declaration of Freedom and Change” forces.³¹³ While civilians believed they had no popular mandate that would qualify them to take such a step, al-Burhan and the military were promoting the idea that normalization would contribute to easing the siege on Sudan, and that it was an opportunity that must be seized to remove Sudan from the “State Sponsors of Terrorism list.”³¹⁴ In the same context, the *New York Times* revealed that the Trump administration offered “cash aid and promises to entice Sudan to recognize Israel before the American election.”³¹⁵

Sudanese parties and forces were divided in their stance on normalization. Several parties (National Umma Party, Sudan Liberation Movement-Second Revolution and the Eastern Front) called for seizing the opportunity and agreeing to the US offer of normalization. Other parties that are part of the government’s political camp, including the National Umma, the Communist, the Arab Socialist Ba‘ath, and the Nasserist Democratic Unionist parties rejected this.³¹⁶ Al-Sadiq al-Mahdi, head of the National Umma Party, launched a campaign lobbying against relations with Israel, he considered that “linking the removal of Sudan from the list of countries sponsoring terrorism to normalization is a blackmail that insults the dignity of the Sudanese people.”³¹⁷ In the same context, the Islamic Jurisprudence Academy in Sudan issued a fatwa prohibiting normalization with Israel in all fields, “as it supports injustice and aids sin and aggression.”³¹⁸

The military ignored the voices opposing a normalization agreement, and at the same time, the civilians who rejected normalization within the Governing Council acquiesced to the military, in order not to break up the ruling coalition. At the end of October 2020, the US announced that Sudan and Israel had agreed to start relations, and a joint statement stated that Trump, al-Burhan, Hamdok and Netanyahu have talked, where Israel and Sudan agreed to begin normalizing their economic relations with an initial focus on agriculture.³¹⁹

Israel sought to showcase the benefits of normalization, with Sudan (after signing) receiving a wheat grant from the UAE and Israel.³²⁰ The Sudanese cabinet had revealed that the US stipulated normalization of relations between Sudan and Israel as a condition to write off Sudan from the “State Sponsors of Terrorism list.”³²¹ Moreover, an Israeli intelligence report showed the benefits of normalization with Sudan, saying that despite the country’s poverty, there is an Israeli interest in normalizing in agriculture and tourism, and working for the reduction of arms smuggling into GS and migration into Israel.³²²

Al-Burhan claimed that the agreement was a peace treaty with Israel and denied there was any US blackmail or pressure from the Gulf States to sign the normalization agreement. He claimed that most Sudanese political forces do not oppose normalization.³²³ Deputy chief of the Transitional Sovereign Council Lieutenant-General Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo (Hemedti) echoed al-Burhan, claiming that the historical position of Sudan on the Palestine issue does not prevent normal relations with Israel, that 90% of Sudanese support normalization, and denied there was any pressure on Sudan to sign the deal.³²⁴

We can say that both claims are disputable (that there was no pressure, and that most Sudanese support normalization). Indeed, then-Sudanese Foreign Minister Omar Qamar al-Din said Sudan had come under pressure for normalization in the last hours of negotiations to get Sudan removed from the US the “State Sponsors of Terrorism list.” Al-Burhan later admitted that Sudan’s removal from the list was linked to normalization with Israel.³²⁵ Regarding alleged majority support for normalization in Sudan, the Sudanese Professionals Association (which backs the ruling coalition) accused the transitional government of deceiving the Sudanese people and said that normalization serves mainly the interests of the US and Israeli administrations’ electoral propaganda, and did not bring the Sudanese people anything but more division among their revolutionary forces.³²⁶ The National Umma Party and the Arab Socialist Ba‘ath Party denied al-Burhan’s statements about their acceptance of normalization.³²⁷

In the same context, demonstrations broke out against the agreement. Sudanese figures, parties and political forces declared categorical opposition to normalization of relations with Israel and called for the formation of a resistance front including the National Umma Party and the Nasserist Democratic Unionist Party. Later, the National Consensus Forces, the second most prominent component of the “Declaration of Freedom and Change” (Civilian component participating in the ruling coalition) rejected normalization with Israel.³²⁸ Indeed, a popular anti-normalization assembly was launched with the participation of 28 Sudanese parties and blocs, under the name of the Coalition of Sudanese Popular Forces Against Normalization with Israel, which includes the Popular Congress Party, the Reform Now Movement, the Just Peace Forum Party, Independent Youth Gathering and Sudan Scholars Association. The signatories to its charter included: the Sudanese Federation of Scholars, Imams and Preachers, the Muslim Brothers Movement, Academics Against Normalization and the Journalists Against Normalization.³²⁹



Al-Burhan ignored the opposition of these political forces to the normalization agreement, saying there is no point in being against a UN member state that has become accepted by the international community, regardless of the circumstances that accompanied its establishment. He stressed that the Transitional Sovereign Council and the ministers were partners in the step of ending hostility with Israel. He further added that whenever the Legislative Council is established, it will be the body authorized to ratify international agreements.³³⁰

The Sudanese Transitional Sovereign Council backed al-Burhan's position, when its spokesperson stated, "Sudan's interest is the supreme criterion in its foreign relations, and if there is an interest in normalization with Israel, we will go through with it to the end."³³¹ However, Sudanese Minister of Culture, Information and Tourism criticized the army for working to develop relations with Israel, without notifying other officials, noting that an Israeli delegation's visit to a Sudanese military factory was done without the knowledge of the Council of Ministers.³³²

The normalization of relations between the two parties began by signing an agreement to promote strategic cooperation, including security, intelligence and stabilization, during a visit by Israeli Intelligence Minister Eli Cohen to Khartoum.³³³ The Sudanese cabinet abolished the "Israel Boycott Law" issued in 1958.³³⁴ Security relations between the two sides were launched, and an Axios website scoop revealed that a "secret" meeting was held between Mossad officials and Deputy Head of the Transitional Sovereign Council General Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo (aka Hemedti) in Khartoum, Sudan.³³⁵

Security cooperation between the two sides led to measures on the ground to crackdown on activities of the Palestinian resistance, which was previously moving freely in Sudan. A controversy erupted following a Reuters report that said the Sudanese authorities confiscated assets and properties belonging to Hamas, while Hamas denied having properties in Sudan. Reuters claimed Hamas's assets in Sudan include "real estate, company shares, a hotel in a prime Khartoum location, an exchange bureau, a TV station, and more than a million acres of farmland."³³⁶ In scientific normalization, an Israeli scientific mission from the city of Eilat sailed to Port Sudan and launched a joint venture with Sudanese researchers, claiming to work to preserve unique coral reefs in the Red Sea.³³⁷

Israel's infiltration of the ruling elite in Sudan, especially the military side, appeared with its intervention after al-Burhan's coup against Hamdok. According to *Haaretz*, the United States asked Israel to use its relations with the military in Sudan to "convince" them to restore civilian-led government. However, *Al-Sudani* newspaper, as well as the Israeli Walla! News website, reported that an Israeli delegation, including Mossad officials, flew to Khartoum immediately after the coup. Analysts indicated that the visit aimed to support the coup and preserve the normalization agreements.³³⁸ Regardless of whether the purpose of the meeting was to support the coup or vice versa, the important thing here is the confirmation received from a Sudanese source and an Israeli source of a visit by a Mossad delegation to Khartoum after the coup. This indicates the extent of the influence that Israel has across the region, and the extent of its penetration into the ruling elite in Sudan.

b. Morocco and Other Arab Countries

Trump announced on Twitter that Morocco and Israel had agreed to normalize relations, including launching flights between Rabat and Tel Aviv, opening two embassies, and establishing economic relations between the two parties. Trump indicated, in another tweet, that he signed a decree of the US recognition of Morocco's sovereignty over Western Sahara, in what appears to be a "down payment" for Morocco's normalization of its relationship with Israel.³³⁹ Moroccan Foreign Minister Nasser Bourita claimed that restoring contact with Israel is not considered normalization, and that Morocco adheres to the basic principles of the two-state solution and negotiation as a basis for resolving the crisis. He denied that the US recognition of sovereignty over the Sahara was in exchange for restoring relations with Israel, especially since there has been a relationship between Morocco and Israel since the 1990s.³⁴⁰ But later, the minister admitted that the agreement with Israel was a package deal that included the Western Sahara.³⁴¹

Israel has relations with Morocco that extend back to before the signing of the "Abraham Accords." For example, in February 2020, the Moroccan army received three Israeli-made reconnaissance drones, sold through France.³⁴² This was confirmed by Moroccan Foreign Minister Nasser Bourita, in an interview with *Yedioth Ahronoth*, in which he indicated that relations between Morocco and Israel were "already normal" before the normalization agreement announced by



Trump.³⁴³ *Haaretz* revealed that Morocco and Israel “have had close economic, diplomatic and military ties for many year,” as well as several previous secret meetings and visits by senior Moroccan and Israeli officials. *Haaretz* reported that the military cooperation between the two sides dates to 1970, when Israel sold tanks to Morocco. The newspaper added that “from 2000 until 2020, a number of secret and not-so-secret visits were made by officials from both countries.”³⁴⁴

Moroccan Prime Minister Saad dine El Otmani, who is affiliated with the Islamic movement, tried to justify the signing of the agreement by noting that normalization is a difficult decision, claiming that Morocco will not give up its support for the Palestine issue. He said that “Morocco will never fall below the level of the Arab Initiative, rather our fundamentals are higher than the initiative.”³⁴⁵ In a telephone conversation with Netanyahu, the Moroccan monarch confirmed the reactivation of cooperation mechanisms between his country and Israel, and the resumption of contacts on a regular basis, within the framework of peaceful and friendly diplomatic relations.³⁴⁶ After the formation of the new Israeli government, in June 2021, the King congratulated Naftali Bennett, for his election as prime minister.³⁴⁷

Israel opened a diplomatic representative office in Morocco following the announcement of the agreement, while Israeli President Isaac Herzog invited the Moroccan monarch to visit Tel Aviv.³⁴⁸ The Israeli Liaison Office in Rabat was unofficially opened at the end of January 2021, coinciding with the arrival of the Israeli Ambassador David Govrin to Morocco.³⁴⁹

After mid-December 2020, Morocco started procedures for resuming contacts and flights with Israel.³⁵⁰ This was followed by signing four agreements between the two parties in various fields, including visa waivers for holders of diplomatic and service passports, an MOU on civil aviation, and an MOU on innovation and the development of water resources. In addition, an MOU was signed for cooperation in finance and investment, as well as negotiating other agreements framing these relations, including an agreement to avoid double taxation, an investment promotion and protection agreement, and a customs assistance agreement.³⁵¹ The two parties also discussed industrial cooperation and partnership in five industrial sectors, covering textiles, food industries, applied research in industry, green technologies and renewable energy.³⁵² An Israel-Morocco Friendship Forum was

also formed under the chairmanship of Sam Ben Chitrit, president of the World Federation of Moroccan Jews. The forum includes public figures, retired police and judicial officers, businessmen and women, former mayors and others. Among its objectives is to promote cooperation between Israel and Morocco in various fields, especially tourism.³⁵³

Morocco signed a strategic partnership agreement with Israeli businessmen working in the private sector, where the two sides agreed to establish a bilateral business council to enhance cooperation between the private sectors of the two countries.³⁵⁴ Meanwhile, the Head of the Israeli Mission to Morocco David Govrin announced the signing of two cooperation agreements, the first between the General Confederation of Moroccan Enterprises (CGEM), the largest corporate group in Morocco, and one of the Israel's top technology companies IBEO. The second agreement was signed between the "National School of Business and Management in Casablanca and Tel Aviv University's School of Management."³⁵⁵ In this context, Moroccan Foreign Minister Nasser Bourita stated, "We... are sincere in our commitments, because we took the decision (for normalization with Israel) with conviction, and we will go to the maximum extent possible in developing bilateral cooperation."³⁵⁶

Morocco went public with its security relations with Israel, as the Moroccan army participated, for the first time, in a joint international exercise in Israel.³⁵⁷ Morocco also signed with Israel an agreement in cyber security, which provides for establishing cooperation in research and development and operational areas in cyber.³⁵⁸ Meanwhile, Moroccan Foreign Minister Nasser Bourita stated that Rabat is awaiting important visits by Israeli officials, including the Ministers of Economy and Defense, and stated that many ministers in the two countries have communicated, paving the way for the signing of nearly 20 (bilateral) agreements in various fields.³⁵⁹

Morocco also started cooperating with Israel to build kamikaze drone sector.³⁶⁰ Israeli Defense Minister Gantz visited Morocco in November 2021, where he signed an agreement on security cooperation between the two countries, which the head of the Political-Military Bureau at Israel's Ministry of Defense, Zohar Palti, described as a "strategic alliance for information," and said that "Morocco has for years been battling terror on several fronts, and is a country that is struggling against al Qaeda and global jihadi groups."³⁶¹ Morocco's Foreign Minister, Nasser



Bourita, called for a “new regional order in which Israel would be an active player,” and expressed his regret that normalization had led to “enmity,” in direct reference to Algeria.³⁶²

As for the reactions to Morocco’s normalization with Israel from the countries surrounding Morocco, Algerian Prime Minister ‘Abdelaziz Djerad said that Algeria is targeted by the agreement, where there is a foreign plan for Israel to reach Algeria’s borders.³⁶³ A spokesperson for the Algerian government stated that Algeria will not rush towards normalization.³⁶⁴ In an interview regarding the position on the Palestine issue and normalization, Algerian President ‘Abdelmadjid Tebboune said that his country’s position on the Palestine issue is not subject to the statute of limitations or inaction. He added that there is an Arab agreement on the principle of “land for peace,” and that Algeria is committed to this position, then added, “But today there is no peace or land, so why normalization?”³⁶⁵

Algeria held the view that the normalization agreement between Morocco and Israel targeted it in the first place. The Algerian presidency accused Morocco and Israel of hatching plots against it, and accordingly decided to “reconsider” its relations with Morocco, which it accused of involvement with Israel in the huge wildfires that swept northern Algeria,³⁶⁶ due to their conflict over the Sahara. Algeria decided to sever diplomatic relations with Morocco, less than a week after declaring that it will “reconsider” its relations with Morocco.³⁶⁷ Algeria agreed with 13 countries to reject the decision to admit Israel into the African Union (AU) to preserve the principles of the union and support the Palestinian Arab statehood, in response to Israel’s acceptance as an observer member.³⁶⁸

In the same context, seven Arab African countries officially objected to the decision of the Chairperson of the African Union Commission (AUC) to grant Israel an “observer” status in the union: Mauritania, Egypt, Algeria, Tunisia, Libya, Comoros and Djibouti.³⁶⁹

As for Tunisia, the Tunisian Prime Minister Hichem Mechichi, stated that normalizing relations with Israel was not on the table, saying, “We respect Morocco’s choice, Morocco is a sister country that we love very much,” adding, “For Tunisia, the question is not on the agenda.” He also said, “Every country has its own reality, its own truth and its own diplomacy, which it considers best for its people.” In his comments, Mechichi said he had not been approached by the US administration about the issue.³⁷⁰

There were conflicting reports about Mauritania's stance. Following reports Mauritania could sign a normalization agreement with Israel, at the invitation of the ruling party, Mauritaniens of all sects and ethnicities went out in mass rallies in the center of the Mauritanian capital, Nouakchott, to support the Palestinian people and denounce the crimes of the Israeli occupation in GS, Jerusalem and the rest of the Palestinian territories.³⁷¹

Meanwhile, Mauritanian President Mohamed Ould Cheikh El Ghazouani received Isma' il Haniyyah, the head of the Hamas political bureau, in the Mauritanian capital, at an official invitation.³⁷² Mauritania denied the existence of any contacts with Israel, following press reports on this issue. The Minister of Culture, Youth, Sports and Relations with Parliament, and the government spokesperson stated, "I categorically deny the existence of any contacts between Mauritania and Israel in any field."³⁷³

Attitudes on normalization in Iraq varied. About 300 local Iraqi leaders called on their government to normalize relations with Israel in a gathering in the city of Erbil in the Kurdistan region.³⁷⁴ By contrast, Iraqi President Barham Salih affirmed his country's position calling for finding a comprehensive and just solution to the Palestine issue. In his speech before the 76th session of the United Nations General Assembly, on 23/9/2021, President Salih said, "Iraq stresses the importance of solving the Palestinian issue and fulfilling the rights of the Palestinian people in an independent state and finding a comprehensive, just and lasting solution. This will also help to stabilize the region and the world."³⁷⁵

The calls for normalization in Erbil sparked official condemnations, and condemnations by political parties and religious movements. The Iraqi government issued a statement expressing its categorical rejection of this meeting and its decisions, and the Supreme Judicial Council of Iraq issued arrest warrants for three people, including a former deputy, who participated in the meeting calling for normalization with Israel.³⁷⁶ But the controversy erupted again over exports of Iraqi Kurdistan's oil to Israel, as experts confirmed that these exports cover 70% of Israel's needs at very low prices, in exchange for the support of the Israel lobby in the US to the Kurdish cause.³⁷⁷



Third: The Developments in Normalization

1. Aviation

Normalization through aviation cooperation proceeded with the signing of agreements between the UAE, Bahrain, Morocco and Israel, opening airline offices and operating direct flights. UAE-based airline Etihad Airways signed an MOU with the Israeli airline El Al, which includes introduction of joint codeshare services, and “cooperation in the fields of cargo, engineering, loyalty, destination management and the optimal use of pilot and cabin crew training facilities.”³⁷⁸

The UAE used aid to Palestinians as a cover to begin aviation normalization. The first direct flight of Etihad Airways arrived from Abu Dhabi to Israel on 19/5/2020, under the pretext of delivering humanitarian aid to the Palestinians in WB and GS.³⁷⁹ Less than a month later, a second Emirati flight landed at the Israeli Lod Airport, with the same pretext used for the first flight.³⁸⁰ To facilitate travel, the UAE Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation announced that UAE citizens will be able to travel to Israel “without the need for a visa and for a maximum period of 90 days per visit.”³⁸¹ Meanwhile, the Bahraini Ministry of Foreign Affairs announced an agreement with Israel on mutual exemption from visa requirements for holders of diplomatic and special passports.³⁸²

Flights with Israel were then institutionalized and legalized. Etihad Airways opened an official representative office in Tel Aviv.³⁸³ In September 2020, El Al operated the first Israeli airline cargo flight to Dubai.³⁸⁴ In September 2020, first direct commercial flight from Israel to Bahrain took place, the Israir-operated flight carried Israeli officials on its way to Manama, for talks to set up an office for the company in the Bahraini capital.³⁸⁵ Meanwhile, the Israeli Minister of Transportation and Road Safety, Miri Regev, announced on 14/10/2020 that the first flight operated by Etihad Airways to fly over Israel came from Milan.³⁸⁶ After that, Etihad Airways launched a website in Hebrew.³⁸⁷ Official efforts to normalize flights culminated with Israel and the UAE reaching an agreement to enable 28 weekly flights between Tel Aviv and Abu Dhabi and Dubai, while charter flights between the UAE and Israel’s Ramon Airport, near Eilat, will be unlimited.³⁸⁸

In the same context, Israel and Bahrain signed an aviation agreement that allows the operation of dozens of regular flights between the two countries.³⁸⁹ Bahrain’s Gulf Air signed an MOU with the Israeli El Al Airlines, according to which it

would operate direct flights to Tel Aviv.³⁹⁰ In this regard, the Bahraini national carrier Gulf Air announced that it had signed five aviation agreements with Israeli entities during a Bahraini trade visit to Israel.³⁹¹

Direct flights continued between the two sides, after an Emirati plane brought the first Israeli tourist group to Dubai, in November 2020.³⁹² Dubai Airports announced that three Israeli airlines will begin operating direct flights from Tel Aviv to Dubai.³⁹³ El Al Airlines announced that it will operate 14 direct flights to Dubai per week.³⁹⁴ Meanwhile, budget airline flydubai, launched its direct commercial flights to Tel Aviv at the end of November 2020.³⁹⁵

Normalization in aviation went beyond direct flights towards joint ventures. The Etihad Aviation Training (EAT) signed a contract with Israir Airlines to offer Full-Flight Simulator pilot training for Israir Airlines' Airbus A320 pilots.³⁹⁶ In April 2021, Etihad Cargo, the cargo and logistics arm of the Etihad Aviation Group, has selected Rom Top Aviation Ltd, as its general sales agent (GSA) for the state of Israel.³⁹⁷ The UAE then became a partner in the Israeli Beresheet 2 space mission.³⁹⁸ In addition, Etihad Engineering "signed a strategic partnership with Israel Aerospace Industries (IAI), to provide Passenger to Freighter (P2F) conversions on Boeing 777-300ER's."³⁹⁹

The Saudi position differed from the UAE-Bahraini position on aviation normalization, despite the Israeli Minister of Interior's approval of an unprecedented decision allowing Israelis to travel to the KSA for "commercial purposes," such as holding business meetings or searching for investments, provided that the traveller receives an official invitation from a host in the KSA,⁴⁰⁰ which was not met with Saudi reciprocation. Despite this, Israeli efforts to normalize aviation relations with KSA continued, where Netanyahu stated, "We are currently working on enabling direct flights, over Saudi Arabia, between Tel Aviv and Dubai and Abu Dhabi." He estimated flight time at "about three hours, just like to Rome."⁴⁰¹ Indeed, after this statement, KSA officially announced that it had agreed to allow all flights to and from the UAE from all countries to cross its airspace, two days after the first public Israeli flight crossed the Kingdom's airspace towards Abu Dhabi.⁴⁰² *Yedioth Ahronoth* newspaper reported that an Israeli plane flew over the holy city of Mecca, KSA, during its flight to India.⁴⁰³ In this regard, a senior Trump administration official said that the KSA agreed to let Israeli airliners cross its airspace enroute to the UAE, after talks between Saudi officials and White House



senior adviser Jared Kushner.⁴⁰⁴ Indeed, the first Israeli commercial flight to Dubai took off in December 2020 via Saudi airspace, after the KSA had agreed.⁴⁰⁵

For its part, Morocco signed an agreement with Israel to operate direct flights between the two sides.⁴⁰⁶ Hundreds of Israeli tourists flocked to Morocco on direct flights, seven months after the normalization of diplomatic relations between Morocco and the Hebrew state with US support.⁴⁰⁷ Meanwhile, the Israeli foreign minister signed with his Moroccan counterpart three agreements for joint cooperation between the two sides, in aviation, political dialogue and culture, youth and sports.⁴⁰⁸

2. Health

The fight against the coronavirus pandemic was used as a tool to promote normalization. Israeli officials announced (before signing the normalization agreement) that the Israeli intelligence service (Mossad) obtained 100 thousand COVID-19 testing kits, procured from the Gulf Arab states.⁴⁰⁹ In parallel, Gargash stated that the UAE would work with Israel in some areas, including combating COVID-19 and technology, even as political differences continue between the two countries.⁴¹⁰ Later, it was revealed that the UAE was the Gulf country from which the devices were purchased. In the first official cooperation between the two countries, two Emirati private sector companies and two Israeli companies announced several joint projects in medicine and COVID-19 response.⁴¹¹

The UAE Group 42 (G42), which specializes in artificial intelligence and cloud computing, has signed with Israel's Rafael Advanced Defense Systems and Israel Aerospace Industries (IAI) two MOUs to explore collaborations in the research and development of effective solutions to combat SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes COVID-19 disease.⁴¹² Meanwhile, the G42 Healthcare group announced the signing of an MOU with the Israeli company NanoScent, which specializes in scent reading technologies, "to explore collaborations in the development, validation, distribution and manufacturing of Scent Check, a revolutionary solution capable of detecting suspected cases of COVID-19 from a sample of exhaled nasal air."⁴¹³

The UAE Minister of Health and Prevention, 'Abdul Rahman Al Owais, discussed, in a phone call with Israeli Minister of Health Yuli Edelstein, bilateral cooperation in the fields of health and scientific research, and ways to enhance cooperation in the medical field, as well as pharmaceutical industries, medical

research, and frameworks for joint cooperation in combating the COVID-19 pandemic, in addition to establishing future projects for scientific and medical partnership and experiments, and exchanging visits between delegations.⁴¹⁴ An Israeli-Bahraini agreement was also signed for cooperation in the medical field. The agreement includes the cooperation in the medical fields, research, innovation and training.⁴¹⁵ A cooperation agreement was also signed between Israel and the UAE in the field of health, which includes the establishment of various projects, including cooperation in combating global epidemics, utilizing advanced technologies for the benefit of the health field, in addition to exchanging experience in the field of electronic and cyber warfare. The agreement also includes the exchange of visits by medical delegations from the two countries.⁴¹⁶

The governments of Bahrain and Israel reached an agreement on mutual recognition of vaccination and green passports. According to the agreement, people vaccinated in both countries, who have received a recognized vaccination in the other country, will be exempted from quarantine, and will also be able to enter places that require a “green passport.”⁴¹⁷ The Department of Health–Abu Dhabi (DoH) signed an MOU with the Israeli Clalit Health Services, to strengthen the exchange of healthcare information and “the implementation of various plans including, but not limited to, digital health initiatives related to artificial intelligence, visiting doctors’ program, professional education, international patient care referrals, research, and clinical trials.”⁴¹⁸ In addition, DoH and the Israeli Sheba Medical Center signed an MOU aimed at exchanging medical expertise and experiences.⁴¹⁹

3. Communications Normalization

The UAE and Israel launched direct telecom links between the two countries, days after a “peace” agreement was signed.⁴²⁰ The Kingdom of Bahrain then opened direct telecom links with Israel.⁴²¹ The Emirates Post Group (EPG) announced that it has added Israel to its global operations network.⁴²²

4. Academic Normalization

Academic normalization between the two parties included the signing of joint academic and research agreements and partnerships. Israel and the UAE agreed to launch student exchange.⁴²³ In September 2020, Mohamed bin Zayed University of Artificial Intelligence (MBZUAI) signed an MOU with the Israeli Weizmann Institute of Science, to cooperate in a number of fields, including “student and



postdoctoral fellow exchange programs, conferences and seminars, various forms of exchange between researchers, sharing of computing resources and the establishment of a joint virtual institute for artificial intelligence.”⁴²⁴ Three research institutes in UAE, US and Israel announced the establishment of a trilateral strategic partnership in research and studies. The three institutes are: the Atlantic Council in Washington, DC, the Emirates Policy Center in Abu Dhabi and the Institute for National Security Studies in Tel Aviv.⁴²⁵ In turn, Morocco signed an agreement with Israel to exchange student delegations and organize study visits between the two sides.⁴²⁶

5. Tourism Normalization

The Israeli and Bahraini Ministers of Tourism agreed on cooperation between the two sides in the field of tourism. They also discussed establishing a trilateral partnership with the UAE in tourism, including reciprocal packages and trips between the three countries, including flights that pass over the KSA.⁴²⁷ This agreement culminated in the signing of Bahraini-Israel MOUs, including the establishment of a forum for tourism exchange.⁴²⁸

6. Media and Art Normalization

As a prelude to the normalization agreement, the UAE ambassador to US, Yousef Al-Otaiba, published an article in the Israeli newspaper *Yedioth Ahronoth*, in which he overviewed the Abu Dhabi government’s vision for close relations with Israel. Otaiba wrote, “we would like to believe Israel is an opportunity, not an enemy.” However, he said, “Israeli plans for annexation and talk of normalization are a contradiction.”⁴²⁹ In a related context, Israeli Foreign Minister Yair Lapid and Emirati Foreign Minister ‘Abdullah bin Zayed published a joint article in also *Yedioth Ahronoth*, in which they share “their aspirations for a strong relationship and bilateral cooperation.”⁴³⁰

In television broadcasting, Dubai TV, Israeli Channel 12 and Bahrain TV aired a joint broadcast on the occasion of signing the two normalization agreements between Israel and UAE and Bahrain.⁴³¹ The Abu Dhabi Media and the Israeli i24NEWS channel signed an MOU in which “both media companies collaborate on multiple fronts including shared reporting and library content, as well as production exchange.”⁴³² The Emirates News Agency (WAM) also signed an agreement with Israel’s Tazpit Press Service (TPS), “to strengthen professional cooperation and

news exchange experiences.⁴³³ A day before the agreement, WAM launched news service in Hebrew.⁴³⁴ In addition, Israeli channel i24NEWS opened a new office in the UAE, where it also started broadcasting.⁴³⁵

In the same context, Gantz, the Israeli Defense Minister, was interviewed by journalists from the KSA, UAE and Bahrain, through the Zoom application. The virtual meeting was organized by the Arab Council for Regional Integration. Answering a question about security cooperation, Gantz said, “the normalization agreements strengthen the fight against Iran... We have shared interests. We all share the battle against the Iranian aggression and its nuclear development which jeopardizes the region and the world, and we’ll establish a united front against it.”⁴³⁶

On the artistic and cultural level, the Abu Dhabi Film Commission, the Israeli Film Fund and the Sam Spiegel Film and Television Lab in Jerusalem signed a cooperation agreement for training and production. The agreement includes plans to hold an annual regional film festival rotating between Abu Dhabi and Israel.⁴³⁷ The UAE Minister of Culture and Youth, Noura bint Mohammed Al Kaabi, discussed with the Israeli Minister of Culture and Sport Hili Topper cultural cooperation considering the “peace” treaty between the UAE and Israel. The two sides agreed to form joint task forces “to draft a framework for future cultural cooperation.”⁴³⁸ The artistic normalization includes showing films from six Arab countries at an Israeli film festival organized by the Van Leer Jerusalem Institute and Cinematheque.⁴³⁹

In the same context, and as a form of artistic normalization, the Saudi MBC channel showed the series *Makhrāj 7* (Exit 7), which encourages normalization with Israel and attacks the Palestinians and their issue. The channel had sparked widespread controversy at the beginning of Ramadan, by broadcasting a series called *Um Harun* (The Mother of Harun) that talked about the history of the Jews in Kuwait.⁴⁴⁰

The purpose of the media and cultural “agreements” between the two parties can be inferred according to several indicators,: On the sidelines of his meeting with the leader of the extremist Shas movement, the UAE ambassador to Israel, Mohamed Al Khaja, attacked Al Jazeera for its coverage of the war on GS.⁴⁴¹ This shows that the goal behind the media agreements between the two parties is to soften the image and practices of the Israel, normalize its existence, and try to silence any party that exposes these practices. Meanwhile, Bahraini Deputy



Foreign Minister Sheikh ‘Abdullah bin Ahmed Al Khalifa signed an agreement with Israel to wage a “war of ideas” against Iran.⁴⁴² This reveals another goal of the technical and cultural cooperation between the two parties, which is to confront the ideology of resistance that Iran adopts in its media discourse along with the resistance forces in the Arab and Muslim world.

7. Sports Normalization

Sports normalization took a new turn after the normalization agreement. The UAE Pro League signed an MOU with the Israel Professional Football League.⁴⁴³ The UAE Football Association signed an MOU with Israel Football Association (IFA), which includes holding friendly matches for all national teams and clubs. Indeed, a match was then held between the Israeli youth team and its Emirati counterpart in mid-December 2021 at Netanya Stadium, built on the ruins of Umm Khaled village. The agreement also covers the establishment of joint workshops “for technical and administrative members of the associations and launching development initiatives that contribute to supporting the game in the two countries.”⁴⁴⁴ In a related context, a member of the ruling family in Abu Dhabi “bought a 50% stake in the Israeli football club Beitar Jerusalem, long tainted by accusations of anti-Arab racism.”⁴⁴⁵

In Morocco, a cooperation agreement was signed between the Israeli Volleyball Association and its Moroccan counterpart.⁴⁴⁶ This was followed by signing a cooperation agreement between IFA and Morocco’s Royal Football Federation (FRMF), and the agreement included establishing “working teams headed by the directors of the two associations,” and allowing the Israeli team to use the Moroccan team’s home. The agreement also provides for cooperation in refereeing and the formation of joint teams in the areas of innovations, training of football executives, and the development of football clubs for women, youth and players with special needs and more.⁴⁴⁷

8. Economically

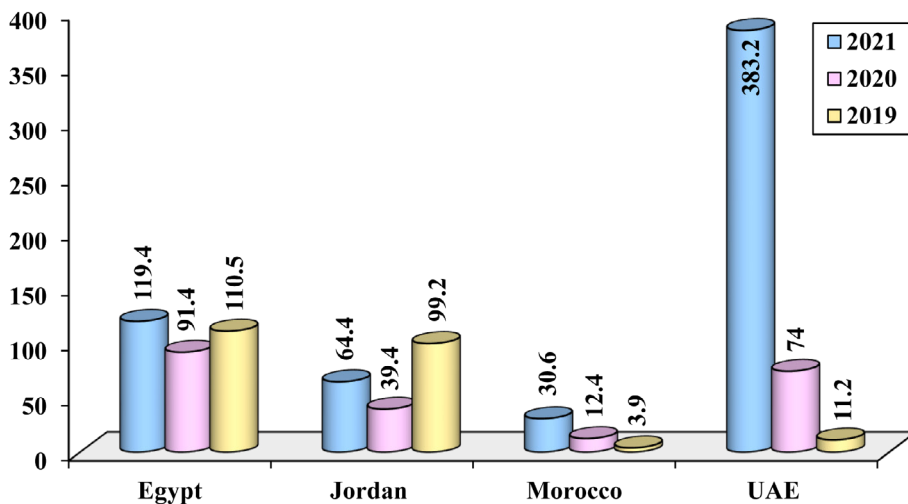
According to a CBS report, trade between Israel and the Arab countries grew by 234%, compared to the same period in 2020, because of the normalization of relations following the “Abraham Accords.” Trade with the UAE surged between January and July 2020, from \$50.8 million to \$613.9 million in the same period in 2021; with Jordan, from \$136.2 million to \$224.2 million; with

Egypt, from \$92 million to \$122.4 million; with Morocco, from \$14.9 million to \$20.8 million. As for Bahrain, direct trade was non-existent in the first seven months of 2020, but during the same period in 2021, it was worth \$300 thousand. The report pointed out that this data does not include trade in jewellery, services and tourism. According to the Israeli economist and businessman, Yitzhak Gal, tourism alone amounts to several million, as more than 230 thousand Israelis entered the UAE in the first seven months of 2021.⁴⁴⁸

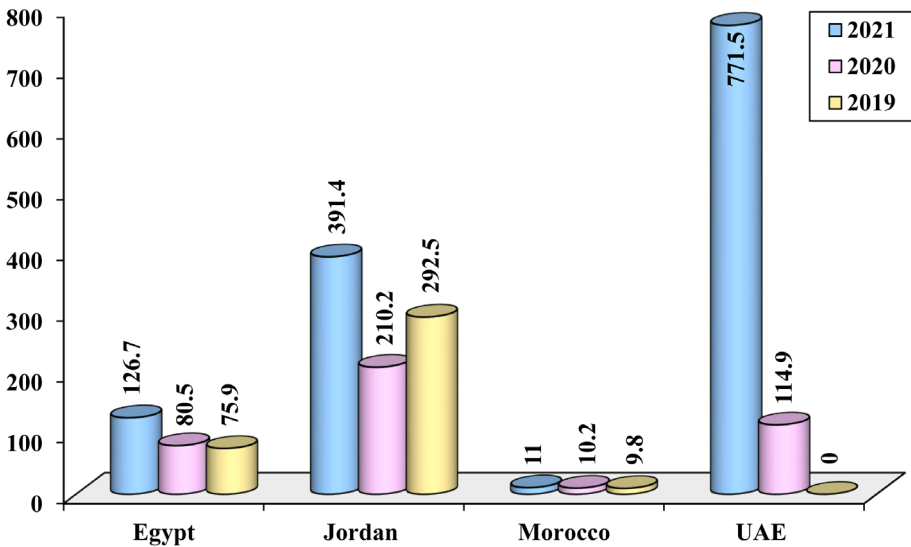
Table 1/6: Israeli Exports and Imports with Some Arab Countries 2019–2021 (\$ million)⁴⁴⁹

Country	Israeli exports			Israeli imports		
	2021	2020	2019	2021	2020	2019
Egypt	119.4	91.4	110.5	126.7	80.5	75.9
Jordan	64.4	39.4	99.2	391.4	210.2	292.5
Morocco	30.6	12.4	3.9	11	10.2	9.8
UAE	383.2	74	11.2	771.5	114.9	0

Israeli Exports to Some Arab Countries 2019–2021 (\$ million)



Israeli Imports From Some Arab Countries 2019–2021 (\$ million)



9. The Arab Public Position and its Directions

The Palestine issue is still the focus of the attention of a high percentage of Arabs. The rejection of normalization with Israel remains the prevailing norm, despite the preoccupation of many people in Arab countries with their own problems, and the unfavorable political circumstance represented by the security grip of authoritarian regimes. According to the Arab Opinion Index survey, 89% of Arabs believe that Israel poses the greatest threat, and 88% of Arabs would disapprove of recognition of Israel by their home countries.⁴⁵⁰ A study by the Israeli Ministry of Strategic Affairs revealed that 90% of the Arab discourse on social media about normalization with Israel is negative. The report indicated that 95% of the critical discourse about the normalization agreement was directed towards the UAE, which led the initiative, not Bahrain.⁴⁵¹

Most Arab populations rejected the liquidation of the Palestine issue, through rejecting the Deal of the Century plan, and rejected normalization agreements between some Arab countries and Israel. The Arab public stood in solidarity with the Palestinian people in confronting the Israeli aggression on Sheikh Jarrah in Jerusalem and GS, and staged celebrations after the end of the war, considering the results of the Sword of Jerusalem Battle a victory.

In terms of rejecting liquidation projects, and after the announcement of the “Deal of the Century,” which aims to liquidate the Palestine issue, the slogans of the Palestine issue dominated the demonstrations of the popular movement (*hirak*) in Algeria. On the 50th week of the movement, thousands of Algerians went out in huge rallies denouncing the Deal of the Century, raising Palestinian flags, and chanting the slogan “Algeria with Palestine whether oppressing or oppressed.”⁴⁵² In Mauritania, political and popular protests rejecting the Deal of the Century were sustained for a period. The Mauritanian Nasserist Youth and the Arab Nationalist Youth movement organized a sit-in in front of the US embassy in the capital, Nouakchott, rejecting the deal.⁴⁵³

In Yemen, thousands in various Yemeni cities came out in massive demonstrations, in rejection of the Trump and in support of the Palestine issue.⁴⁵⁴ An extensive meeting was also held in Sanaa, attended by a wide range of leaders of Yemeni parties and political forces with the participation of Palestinian factions, in support of the Palestine issue and rejection of normalization.⁴⁵⁵ Hundreds of Yemenis demonstrated in the governorate of Aden, which is controlled by Emirati-backed forces, in protest against the Emirati normalization agreement with Israel.⁴⁵⁶ The Grand Mufti of the Sultanate of Oman, Ahmad bin Hamad al-Khalili, said in a post on Twitter that the liberation of *al-Aqsa* Mosque and the liberation of all the land around it from any occupation, is a sacred duty of all the Muslim *Ummah* (nation), and a debt that they all have to fulfil. Al-Khalili added in his tweet that if circumstances do not help now to liberate the mosque, the *Ummah* has no right of bargaining over it.⁴⁵⁷

Political dissidents in the UAE announced the establishment of a league against normalization, after their country announced the establishment of official relations with Israel.⁴⁵⁸ Several Arab writers and intellectuals, under the name “Arab Writers and Intellectuals Against Normalization,” called for signing a petition declaring their rejection of the Emirati normalization agreement.⁴⁵⁹

In Bahrain, political associations and civil society institutions reaffirmed their adherence to the fundamentals of the Bahraini people concerning the Palestine issue, the provisions of the Bahraini constitution that criminalizes normalization with Israel, and the official and popular Arab and Muslim consensus rejecting the US sponsored normalization agreement.⁴⁶⁰ In parallel, the Gulf Coalition Against Normalization announced that the “Palestine Charter campaign” that it launched



at the time of signing the two normalization agreements between Israel, and the UAE and Bahrain at the White House, exceeded one million memberships in less than 24 hours since its launch.⁴⁶¹ Meanwhile, 17 Bahraini political societies and civil society institutions confirmed, in a joint statement, that normalization with Israel does not represent the will of the people of the Kingdom, and will not bring peace.⁴⁶² Bahraini institutions and associations also issued a charter in which they announced rejection of normalization with Israel, and their support of the Palestine issue and the legitimate rights of the Palestinian people.⁴⁶³ Demonstrations took place in Bahrain, rejecting normalization and denouncing the visit of Israeli Foreign Minister Yair Lapid, who inaugurated the Israeli embassy in Manama.⁴⁶⁴

Sixteen Arab trade unions, societies, student groups, and political associations and organizations opposed to normalization announced the launch of a broad popular campaign to boycott “Zionist [Sympathizers] institutions” that support Israel.⁴⁶⁵ Meanwhile, 41 Kuwaiti organizations called in a joint statement for parliament to pass a law that “criminalizes” normalization with Israel.⁴⁶⁶ Popular demonstrations took place in the Jordanian capital, Amman, bearing the slogan “The people want to overthrow normalization,” in which the participants denounced the cooperation agreement between Jordan and Israel, funded by the UAE, in the field of water desalination and solar energy generation, demanding its immediate cancellation and the cancellation of all normalization projects with Israel, including the Wadi Arabah Peace Treaty, and the projects of gas, electricity and water.⁴⁶⁷

In Morocco, 28 associations called for a protest in solidarity with Palestine, and in rejection of the normalization agreements between the UAE and Bahrain and Israel.⁴⁶⁸ After Morocco signed a normalization agreement with Israel, a statement of the League of Arab Maghreb Scholars called on the Moroccan authorities to reconsider normalization with Israel, stressing that “this matter will remain a disgrace on the forehead of a country that has done its duty to defend the nation’s cause for decades.”⁴⁶⁹ The principal Islamic parties and groups in Morocco also rejected Rabat’s announcement of normalization with Israel: The Unity and Reform Movement, the religious preaching wing of the Justice and Development Party (JDP), which leads the government coalition, said in a statement that it “rejects and condemns all attempts of normalization and Zionist penetration.” The banned but popular Moroccan Justice and Charity Group said normalization agreements are “a stab to the Palestine issue, and a betrayal of the Palestinian people.”⁴⁷⁰ The

National Syndicate of Moroccan Press issued a statement declaring its rejection of any normalization or media communication with the Israel at the expense of the legitimate and inalienable rights of the Palestinian people.⁴⁷¹ Meanwhile, 15 political, union and human rights bodies announced the establishment of a new Moroccan entity to support the Palestine issue and oppose normalization. The body, which was established under the name of the “Moroccan Front in Support of Palestine and Against Normalization,” said in a press statement, “This step came in response to the Moroccan state’s official signing of the normalization agreement with the Zionist entity.”⁴⁷² In the same context, 200 Mauritanian scholars issued a fatwa prohibiting normalization with the Israeli occupation.⁴⁷³

In the same vein, Algerians welcomed judoka Fathi Norine with the chants about Palestine after he refused to face an Israeli player in the Tokyo 2020 Olympics, despite knowing that he would be punished with a ban.⁴⁷⁴ The Sudanese judoka, Mohamed ‘Abdul Latif, also announced at the same Olympics that he would not play the match against an Israeli judoka.⁴⁷⁵

About 50 Moroccan cities witnessed massive demonstrations, during the Sword of Jerusalem Battle, in support of the Palestinians and to denounce the Israeli attacks. The demonstrations were characterized by the massive participation of a diverse set of political, legal and trade union groups and many citizens of different ages, men, women and children. The Moroccan Front in Support of Palestine and Against Normalization called for these protests, which affirmed that various components of the Moroccan people support the Palestine issue.⁴⁷⁶

In the same context, and under the slogan Palestine Rises, thousands of Qataris and Arab and Muslim communities in the capital, Doha, participated in a massive solidarity festival, to express their support for the Palestinian people who are subjected to continuous Israeli aggression.⁴⁷⁷

Despite the bitterness of a decade displacement of hundreds of thousands of Syrians, it did not prevent them from showing solidarity with the Palestinian people and the people of Sheikh Jarrah neighborhood, where they held demonstrations in their scattered camps in the north of Syria in support of Palestine.⁴⁷⁸

Lebanon also witnessed protests, sit-ins, and stances, under the title “You Are Not Alone,” in support of the Palestinian people in their confrontation with the occupation in Jerusalem and GS.⁴⁷⁹

Arab peoples celebrated the victory of the resistance after the Sword of Jerusalem Battle. The Grand Mufti of the Sultanate of Oman, Sheikh Ahmad bin Hamad al-Khalili, praised the Palestinian resistance, saying that it has “washed the nation’s forehead from shame.”⁴⁸⁰ Celebrations were also held in Libya, Iraq, Jordan and the Palestinian RCs in Lebanon, for the victory of the resistance in GS, and sweets were distributed there.⁴⁸¹

Conclusion

The reactions of the Arab regimes to the Deal of the Century and normalization varied. Their positions were divided into three axes: the first is the axis of rejection of this deal; the second is the axis of participation and involvement; and the third axis whose position was ambiguous and hesitant between rejection and acceptance. In general, none of the Arab countries showed effectiveness in influencing events and policymaking in the region. Their role was limited at best to playing the role of mediator, as Egypt did by mediating a truce agreement between Israel and the Palestinian resistance after the Sword of Jerusalem Battle.

In 2020 and 2021, several Arab countries signed normalization agreements with Israel. This began with the UAE and Bahrain, who were followed by Sudan and Morocco. These countries ignored what was previously agreed upon in the Arab summits in terms of rejecting political settlement and normalization before reaching a solution to the Palestine issue based on the Arab Peace Initiative.

The normalizing regimes claimed that they were seeking to advance national interests by signing normalization agreements, without abandoning support for the rights of the Palestinian people. The UAE and Bahrain invoked confronting Iranian influence, and their need for an alliance with a force parallel to the Iranian force to help them confront it. The Sudanese regime invoked its attempt to remove Sudan from the “State Sponsors of Terrorism list,” for its economy to be freed from the Western embargo it. Morocco justified its signature by invoking US recognition of its sovereignty over the disputed Western Sahara, where Algeria is involved.

The Arab popular positions in support of the Palestine issue and rejecting normalization of relations with Israel were divided between rejecting the liquidation of the Palestine issue and demonstrating against the Deal of the Century and rejecting the normalization agreements signed between some Arab

countries and Israel. Committees were formed and statements were issued, with calls for demonstrations to express this opposition. The Arab peoples showed their solidarity with the Palestine issue, as evident in the broad popular solidarity with the Palestinian people in their response to the Israeli aggression on Sheikh Jarrah in Jerusalem and GS during the Sword of Jerusalem Battle, and in celebrations and expressions of joy on social media after the confrontation ended, celebrating the victory of the resistance.

The positions of the countries surrounding Israel (Egypt, Jordan, Syria and Lebanon) regarding the Palestine issue also varied. The years 2020–2021 witnessed unremitting efforts by Egypt to restore its regional role, which had declined significantly in the previous decade, evident by holding diplomatic meetings and summits that included leaders of pivotal countries in the region dealing with the Palestine issue. This was accompanied by Egypt's continuation of previous policies regarding dealing with Palestinian factions, in terms of considering the PLO and the PA the official representatives of the Palestinians, while the relationship with the resistance factions in GS fluctuated up and down according to events, and the need to play a role in the truce and prevent escalation with Israel.

The Egyptian Foreign Ministry deviated from the LAS position on the Deal of the Century, by welcoming the efforts led by the US administration to achieve "peace." Furthermore, its relations with Israel witnessed remarkable development that included strengthening political, security and economic relations.

Jordan tried to play a diplomatic role in the Palestine issue by participating in several Egyptian diplomatic initiatives. The Jordanian official position on the Palestinian factions intersected with Egypt's, in terms of preferring to deal with the PA, while keeping back channels with Hamas. However, the Jordanian position on the Deal of the Century differed from the Egyptian, in terms of refusing to deal with it, especially because of the categorical refusal to settle Palestinian refugees, and the sensitivity of the issue of Hashemite jurisdiction over the holy sites in Jerusalem. This was reflected in the fluctuating relationship with Israel, despite some warmth in terms of economic normalization, whether through the import of gas or through solar energy projects.

The positions of Syria and Lebanon regarding the rejection of the Deal of the Century were similar. Despite the sharp political division in Lebanon, there was unanimity among the Lebanese parties to reject the deal. On the security front,



Israeli attacks on Syrian territory continued, while the Lebanese-Israeli security atmosphere witnessed more tension, in light of the repeated threats from Israel to launch a destructive war on Lebanon, in order to limit Hizbullah's combat capabilities. However, the security tension and mutual threats between Hizbullah and Israel did not prevent indirect negotiations between the Lebanese government and Israel to demarcate maritime borders.

As for the relations between Syria and Lebanon and the Palestinian factions, they witnessed some discrepancies, where the Syrian official position was open to Fatah and had reservations on the relations with Hamas. Nonetheless, the relationship between Hizbullah, the strong ally of the Syrian regime in Lebanon, and Hamas witnessed more rapprochement and coordination. Part of the Lebanese state's relationship with the Palestinian refugees has also seen a breakthrough through a decision issued by the Lebanese Minister of Labor, to allow the refugees to practice many professions that were prohibited to them, despite some calls for the continuation of the repulsive environment in dealing with the Palestinians, advocated by a group of Lebanese, under the pretext of refusing the resettlement of refugees.

In terms of forecasting the next two years, in light of the widespread popular rejection of normalization, instability of the region, the end of President Trump's term, the decline in pressure on the Arab regimes, the Palestinian consensus rejecting the Deal of the Century and the path of normalization, and the victory of the resistance in the Sword of Jerusalem Battle, we expect that there will be competing trends governing the actions of some Arab regimes, either proceeding with normalization or delaying or freezing it. However, the push towards normalization is likely to decline, not only for the previous reasons, but because the normalizing states will find that the costs and burdens of normalization are much greater than what they have hoped to achieve. Indeed, the relationship with the Israeli side will continue to suffer from a crisis of trust and credibility, given that the Israeli side often deals with opportunism and condescension, and does not have the slightest chance of becoming a friend or ally.

The Arab states will continue to support the peace process and the current official PLO and PA leadership. The main regimes concerned with the Palestinian file will remain opposed or reserved towards the resistance and the Islamic movements, which will hinder any real rearrangement of the Palestinian political house in a way that reflects the weight of the real forces and their popularity on the ground.

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This Report

Al-Zaytouna Centre is pleased to present to its readers the Palestine Strategic Report (PSR) 2020–2021, the 12th PSR to be published.

With an academic methodology and comprehensive objective approach, the report details the developments concerning the Palestine issue and provides the latest information and data available at the end of 2021, along with analyses and forecasts.

This report is the result of collaborative work of 15 experts and researchers. In eight chapters, it addresses the internal Palestinian scene; Palestinian demographic and economic indicators; the situation in Jerusalem and the holy sites; the specifics of Israeli aggression, Palestinian resistance and the peace process; the internal situation in Israel, politically, economically and militarily; and Palestine's Arab, Islamic, and international relations.

The PSR now occupies a prominent position as an indispensable reference, integral to Palestine studies and research. Al-Zaytouna Centre hopes the PSR will continue to make valuable contributions in this field.

Prof. Dr. Mohsen Mohammad Saleh

The Palestine Strategic Report 2020 – 2021



Al-Zaytouna Centre for Studies & Consultations

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