President of the State of Palestine and Palestinian National Authority Mahmoud Abbas asked the United Nations to convene an international conference on the Middle East in 2021, after two Gulf states normalized their ties with Israel and once the US presidential election has taken place. According to his statement, “a genuine peace process” will lead to an end of occupation and “the achievement by Palestinian people of their freedom and independence within their State”, with its capital in East Jerusalem and its borders based on 1967 lines, and to a resolution of “all final status issues, notably the question of the refugees”. Mahmoud Abbas’s appeal came amid concerns among Palestinians about a steady erosion in once-unified Arab support and lack of progress in their long-term campaign to establish their own state.

Earlier, both the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain agreed to normalize their relations with Israel, which was a major diplomatic win for US President Donald Trump. Publicly, the leadership of both of these Gulf states have stated that they support all the efforts “toward achieving a just and comprehensive solution on the Palestinian issue”. Still, their shared concern about Iran’s rising influence in the region is reportedly what brought Israel, the UAE and Bahrain together. Mahmoud Abbas also stressed that Palestinians would “continue resisting all attempts and plans to erase” them, and would secure their “rightful and natural place among nations and exercise the rights granted” to them by international legitimacy. “Let everyone know there will be no peace, no security, no stability and no coexistence in our region while this occupation continues and a just, comprehensive solution to the question of Palestine, the core of the conflict, remains denied,” he stated.

The Palestinian leadership rejected Donald Trump’s peace deal because the plan, crafted by President’s son-in-law and Senior Advisor Jared Kushner, an Orthodox Jew, is aimed at furthering the ambitions of Israelis. If Donald Trump loses the upcoming presidential election, the conference, requested by Mahmoud Abbas, will take place with Joe Biden at the helm, who reportedly supports a two-state solution. Rivals, the Fatah party and Hamas (a Sunni-Islamic fundamentalist militant organization in control of the Gaza strip), have even agreed to hold elections at the beginning of 2021. They “renewed reconciliation efforts” after “Israel reached diplomatic accords” with the UAE and Bahrain.

Palestinian officials have called the normalization of relations between Israel and both Bahrain and the UAE as a “stab in the back”. Still, the Palestinian leadership clearly understand that change is inevitable and that the support for their position has been waning. In 1979, the peace treaty signed by Israel and Egypt was widely condemned across the Arab world because it was viewed as one-sided. As a result, Egypt was suspended from the Arab League in 1979–1989, and all the leaders of Muslim-majority countries sided with Palestinian people, thereby demonstrating the strength of their resolve. Nowadays, the situation has changed completely, as some Arab states seem eager to foster relations with Israel regardless of whether or not the Israeli–Palestinian conflict has been resolved or not.

The diplomatic normalization accords signed by Israel with the Arab nations of Bahrain and the UAE put the focus on the ever increasing role and importance of Saudi Arabia. After all, the Kingdom is widely viewed as the “older brother” of other Gulf countries. Saudi Arabia, in terms of religious influence and military clout, is one of the leading forces of the Cooperation Council for the Arab States of the Gulf (GCC). It was also at the center of the 2017 crisis, as a result of which Riyadh, Abu Dhabi and Manama (the capital of Bahrain) cut diplomatic ties with Qatar. Hence, Saudi Arabia, like a “quiet calculating regional heavyweight”, must have supported the efforts made by the UAE and Bahrain in relation to Israel in order to continue fostering ties with Tel Aviv. Officially, however, Riyadh continues to endorse the 2002 Arab Peace Initiative, which called for the normalization of relations between the Arab world and Israel in exchange for concessions made by Israel and “the establishment of a Palestinian state with East Jerusalem
There are various reasons behind Bahrain’s and UAE’s recent actions. In fact, Bahrain was viewed as a country that could actually establish diplomatic relations with Israel first. However, its small size, predominantly Shiite population and the remaining unease about the 2011 uprising, all indicated that Bahrain was probably more vulnerable to threats if it had been the first Gulf state to take a step towards normalization.

On the other hand, the UAE has been referred to as the “little Sparta” of Middle East. Reportedly, Abu Dhabi has been at the forefront of the fight against the Muslim Brotherhood (a religiopolitical organization banned in the Russian Federation) and has had serious concerns about Iran-led aggression in the region. In 2015, the UAE joined the Saudi-led coalition in its intervention in Yemen, which started after the pro-Saudi President of Yemen asked for military support to defeat the Houthi movement, backed by Iran. All of this has made the UAE into a nation playing the most dynamic role in the Persian Gulf region in many ways, which include its willingness to normalize relations with Israel.

Qatar, on the other hand, is on the opposite end of the “spectrum” to the UAE. The tiny country has been seemingly punching above its weight, as over the past three decades, it has been accused of “influence peddling” and of supporting Sunni militant groups operating outside the central region of the Middle East. Qatar’s independent decisions and close ties with Iran and Turkey eventually caused Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Bahrain to cut ties with it in 2017.

At this point, Saudi Arabia’s key role in all of this should be more apparent. Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud (colloquially known as MBS), who is likely to become the next King and is behind Riyadh’s current stance, appears to be fully in control of the kingdom’s foreign policies. He supported the war in Yemen and seemed to make mistakes often by underestimating the extent of Qatar’s influence abroad and its ability to oppose Saudi Arabia. Still, the Crown Prince has weathered the storm and now needs to carefully calculate his next move. Saudi Arabia has not defeated the Houthi rebels despite the fact it has been waging war against them for the past 5 years. Reportedly, Iran continues to deliver its drones to Sana’a, the capital of Yemen controlled by the Houthis. They are subsequently used to carry out attacks against Saudi Arabia. No amount of USA’s high-tech military equipment can resolve this ongoing problem so far. The Houthis have proven to be formidable enemies. In 2019, citing claims made by the Houthi movement, Al Jazeera reported that an attack had been carried out on Saudi forces by the rebels and “thousands” of enemy troops had been captured. The Houthis seem to have established one of the most successful rebel movements in the Middle East. After all, they have managed to carry out attacks deep within Saudi territory.

On September 24, The Guardian, an informative British newspaper, suggested that after Saudi Arabia’s regional allies, such as Bahrain and the UAE, signed diplomatic accords with Israel, the Kingdom could use their actions as “cover to follow” suit. After all, Riyadh has long maintained its anti-normalization stance in public. According to the article, “such a move would mark a seismic shift in the region’s geopolitics”. If it were to happen, Palestinians would no longer have a strong Arab backing in any future peace negotiations with Israel and might be forced to compromise on their core issues.

Reports from the region suggest that although Saudi Arabia appears to be under pressure from the United States to normalize its relations with Israel, the Kingdom should also take into account its image on the global arena; its pragmatic interests, and how influential its ties with members of the Trump administration actually are. Still, it is possible that we are in for a surprise in October. After all, two key agreements to normalize diplomatic ties between Israel and two Arab nations were signed in the past two months. Considering the possibility that Israel could face a backlash from the international community in the near future, and the fact that its government appears unwilling to make concessions to the Palestinian leadership, which remains divided, continues to age and refuses to have talks with either Israel or Washington, what happens next remains unclear.

In any case, regardless of developments in the region, for now, Palestinians are still firm in their stance, i.e. they will not sign a peace deal with Israel until the latter stops its occupation of Palestinian territories; a Palestinian state with East Jerusalem as its capital is established, and all the final status issues, including that of refugees, are resolved. The question remaining is “Will the Israeli leadership agree to these just demands made by Palestinians?”. For now, Tel Aviv appears to be twisting the Palestinians’ arm with the help of its Western allies, first and foremost, the United States, and to be taking advantage of the political fatigue felt by some leaders of the Arab world.

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