

Israeli Reactions to the Abraham Peace Accords with the UAE and Bahrain

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On September 15, 2020, leaders of Israel, the United Arab Emirates and the Kingdom of Bahrain [signed The Abraham Accords](#), witnessed by the United States' President Trump, on the White House lawn. The reaction across different segments of Israeli society to the new treaties has varied widely.

General Israeli Population

As a whole, Israelis greeted the Accords with satisfaction and even celebration. Newspapers featured banner headlines, television news carried ongoing, extended broadcasts, and social media was full of stories of Israelis searching for resorts, flights, shopping and vacations in Dubai.

The Israel Democracy Institute carried out a [poll](#) through the Midgam Institute between August 31 and September 2, just after the deal was announced. Large majorities of those polled said that they thought the agreement would benefit Israel across a variety of fields, including economic (79%), “political-diplomatic” (76%) and in terms of tourism (76%). A smaller majority of 53% thought the deal would contribute to Israel’s national security as well.

Yet, Israel today is deeply divided along partisan lines. Similar to the current situation in the United States, almost every issue in the Jewish state is today viewed through a political lens, and the new peace agreements are no exception.

When Israelis see their Prime Minister on the White House lawn (alongside President Trump, another divisive figure), it is difficult for many to separate the act from the players, and there can be little doubt that politics cloud the perception of the Accords for many.

This situation is muddied further by the somewhat counter-intuitive fact that in Israel, working towards peace is generally seen as an almost supreme value by those on the left (who tend to dislike Netanyahu), while the presumed compromise made to reach the Accords – a suspension of any annexation plans – is generally a non-starter for those on the right (by and large Netanyahu’s supporters). In other words, from a purely ideological standpoint, one could have expected Netanyahu’s natural supporters to oppose the Accords, and his detractors to support them.

Alternate Prime Minister and Defense Minister Benny Gantz, who is Netanyahu’s main rival in government, also supported the Accords, [saying](#) they expressed an “alliance between countries in the region who aim for stability and prosperity.” He said the agreement will have “many positive implications” on the region and called on other Arab states to also pursue peace deals with Israel.

One controversial aspect of the Accords for many Israelis has been the proposed sale of fighter jets by the U.S. to the UAE. While not officially part of the Accords, it has been [widely reported](#) that in exchange for the deal, Netanyahu agreed not to protest the [U.S. selling](#) its most advanced fighter jet, the F-35, to the UAE. (Netanyahu has [denied](#) he made such an undertaking).¹

¹ Under a twelve-year-old American law, the U.S. is “committed to maintaining [Israel’s qualitative military edge](#).” As part of that commitment, Israel has been the only nation in the region to be allowed to purchase F-35s. [According to](#) Chuck Freilich, a former Israeli deputy national security adviser, referring to the proposed sale to the UAE, “From a purely military perspective, I think it’s a dangerous development. It’s not just a new weapons technology. The F-35 is an entire weapons platform.” He said the F-35s would represent a “dramatic upgrading” of the UAE’s military capability. And as such, some Israelis have expressed hesitation at welcoming the Accords if the sale of F-35s was indeed a *quid pro quo*.

Arab- Israelis

Among Arab citizens of Israel, the reaction to the Accords was more mixed. Arab Israeli leaders, mainly led by the 15 members of Knesset from the Joint List representing Arab parties, tend to take their cues on diplomatic issues from the Palestinian Authority, led by PA Chair Mahmoud Abbas. The PA condemned the Accords outright, calling them a “betrayal of the Palestinian cause.” Member of Knesset Mtanes Shehadeh, representing the Balad Party, [said in a September 15 interview](#) on Israel Channel 11 Television that the Abraham Accords will “sow destruction in the region and in the entire world.”

Indeed, according to the [Democracy Institute poll](#), while 55% of Israeli Jews said the Accords would contribute to the prospects of Israeli-Palestinian peace, (and 22% said it would hurt), among Arab Israelis, just 33% thought it would contribute, while 37% said it would detract.

Despite this, there have been growing voices in the Israeli Arab community who view the Accords favorably and are excited by the prospects of peace with a developed Arab country. According to this [opinion piece](#), one group of Arab Israelis, “consists of shrewd and well-established businesspeople who view the recent developments in the Gulf and the burgeoning official relations with Israel as a spectacular, exciting and excellent opportunity for their business and economic advancement.” The piece further argued that “this is the time when this population, which masters the Arabic language and is deeply familiar with the regional culture, enjoys an acute advantage.”

Similarly, Arab Israeli writer Jalal Bana [argued](#) that “The dream of closeness and contact with my cultural and linguistic brothers across the sea has become a reality. It is palpable in conversations I have with residents of Gulf States, especially UAE citizens, who see Israel – and Israelis – differently than we have been led to believe.” This [article](#) in the New York Times on Arab Israeli reactions to the deal presents the nuanced reactions.

The Left

The left side of the Israeli political map, while largely welcoming the deal, has expressed some reservations. Most opposition leaders, including Head of the Opposition in the Knesset, MK Yair Lapid, have [warmly supported](#) the deal. But many have also questioned the timing of the signing which they claim is designed to both deflect attention from Netanyahu’s mishandling of the Coronavirus situation, as well as to boost support for Netanyahu’s ally and friend, President Trump, prior to the U.S. elections.

More significantly, many on the left who support the Two State Solution and strongly advocate for the Palestinian cause, are afraid that the Accords move the world’s focus away from the Palestinians’ plight and provide legitimization for Israel’s security and diplomatic policies, at the Palestinians’ expense.

In [a poll](#) from September 14, commissioned by the (left-leaning) Geneva Initiative in conjunction with the Adva Center, 34% of Israelis said they preferred that the Jewish state make a deal first with the Palestinians before signing another agreement with an Arab state.

The Right

Israel’s right-leaning population generally warmly supports Prime Minister Netanyahu, and therefore welcomed the new peace agreements as another triumph for the nation’s leader. However, while not officially part of the Accords, it was [widely reported](#) that in exchange for the United Arab Emirates agreeing to the deal, Israel agreed to suspend plans to annex parts of the West Bank. Such a potential annexation was a policy long sought by Israel’s right, especially the settler population, and as soon as the deal was announced, many leaders were furious. David Elhayani, head of the Yesha Council of Settlers, referring to the Prime Minister, [said](#), “He deceived us. He has deceived half a million residents of the area and hundreds of thousands of voters.”

Nonetheless, the [government has stated](#) that plans for annexation are still on the table. At the same time, many on the right are aware that even before the new Accords were announced, the U.S. Administration was opposed to annexation

at this time, and therefore Israel was unlikely to make such a move now in any event. As a result, others on the right have also welcomed the Accords. Efrat Mayor Oded Revivi, a top leader in the Yesha Council (who recently addressed Federations through a JFNA [zoom call](#) on extending Israeli sovereignty, and expressed his strong support for annexation), [tweeted](#) that “The Israeli agreement to postpone the application of Israeli law in the Jewish settlements in Judea and Samaria is a fair price.”

In the [Geneva Initiative Poll](#), out of those questioned, 47% of Israelis said they supported the suspension of annexation, and 24% said they opposed it. Out of the Likud respondents (Prime Minister Netanyahu’s party), 36% said they supported the suspension, and 32% said they opposed it.

The Abraham Accords will likely lead to a warming of relations between Israel and the broader Arab world, including significantly increased trade, tourism and cultural ties. The Accords are the first peace treaty between Israel and an Arab country in more than a quarter of a century, and news reports indicate that additional such treaties with other Arab and Muslim countries are not far away. As a result, the Accords have been widely welcomed by Israeli society despite being perceived by Palestinian leadership as yet another blow to the Palestinian cause.

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