

In Bahrain, Opposition to Normalization Unsurprisingly Greater Than In the UAE

by Hugh Fitzgerald



While Emiratis have been enthusiastic about their government's decision to normalize relations with Israel, and a dozen agreements to collaborate have already been announced, between Emirati and Israeli universities, research institutes, and businesses, in Bahrain the popular response has been different. The story is [here](#).

Bahraini citizens took to social media throughout the weekend to voice strong opposition to the normalization deal with Israel, which many called an "act of treason."

Unlike the relatively positive public response that was seen

in the United Arab Emirates, the responses in Bahrain were harsher, including heavy criticism directed towards the government for reaching the deal with Israel...

“This is a disaster; a black day in our history,” said Halil Bukhaza, a local activist. “None of us will visit Palestine until it’s free and independent.”

Prominent journalist Razi al-Musawi added that the deal was made in order to serve the interests of Israel and the US, not those of Bahrain and the Gulf states, which are being criticized for abandoning the Palestinian issue...

The Bahraini opposition reached social media platforms as well, with a Twitter campaign launched titled “Bahrainis against normalization,” which became the top trending tweet on Friday.

The online campaign also grew to include criticism and a general sense of frustration against the American administration.

Others, however, expressed a positive attitude toward the deal. Ahadia Ahmad, head of Bahrain’s journalists association, said that “this is an amazing step, and a positive step towards the peace process,” adding that “we need practical solutions, not emotional ones. Through a peace agreement with another country, more opportunities are opened for more negotiations.”

There is nothing surprising about the response in Bahrain, which has been split along sectarian lines – something the author of the article does not make clear. Sixty percent of the population in Bahrain is Shi’a, and they have long been opposed to the Sunni ruling family, the Al-Khalifa. In 2011, there was a violent uprising by the majority Shi’a, which was suppressed by Saudi and Pakistani soldiers called in by the ruling family. The Shi’a naturally look to Iran for guidance,

and Iran has been the harshest critic – along with the Palestinians and Turkey – of the UAE decision, in mid-August, to normalize relations with Israel. The Sunnis naturally view their fellow Shi'a as a threat – as the 2011 revolt showed them to be – not just to the ruling family, but to the well-being of ordinary Sunnis in Bahrain. They are seen as willing collaborators with Iran in its attempt to create a “Shi'a crescent” from the Gulf to the Mediterranean. What the Shi'a oppose, the Sunnis will naturally support. And thus it has just been with the distinctly differing responses of Sunnis and Shi'a to Bahrain's “normalization” of relations with Israel.

King Hamad al-Khalifa knew his decision would not be popular among Bahrain's Shi'a majority, and it thus took more courage for him than it did for the Emirati rulers, whose people were clearly enthusiastic about normalization. He was prompted by several calculations. One is that he will be rewarded by the Americans for joining the “circle of peace.” The ruling family has already tied itself to Washington by accommodating on its territory the large American naval base in Bahrain. Now the Al-Khalifa rulers have a further claim on the Americans and their protection, should the Shi'a again rise in revolt. The country is also said to be interested in buying air defense systems from the U.S., and Bahrain's “normalization” of relations with Israel should help expedite the request.

Bahrain has for years cultivated ties with American Jews, and in 2018 King Hamad invited members of a synagogue to visit. That synagogue, in Hampton, Long Island, was carefully chosen; it has many powerful and well-heeled people in its congregation. Bahrain also appointed a Jewish woman, Houda Nonoo – there are 37 Jews in Bahrain – to be its ambassador in Washington from 2008 to 2013. Normalizing relations with Israel can in part be understood as a continuation of that campaign.

The Bahrainis are now split along sectarian lines: the Sunnis

support their Sunni king's decision on normalization, the Shi'a are against. But if the new ties to Israel – a rich trading partner for Bahrain, with a high-tech economy – bring economic benefits to the Kingdom that will be shared by all, some of those benefiting Shi'a may over time mute their opposition. That is what King Hamad is hoping. And the Israelis will no doubt be going out of their way to ensure that Bahrainis of both sects profit in order to make his political gamble pay off.

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