

The Abraham Accords are Working



by Michael Curtis

They shall beat their swords into ploughshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Spring may be a little late this year, but it is blossoming.

On February 14, 2022, Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett arrived in Manama, Bahrain, a small island country in the Persian Gulf with a population of 1.5 million, and which has had a very small Jewish population for more than a century. It was the first trip by an Israeli prime minister to this Gulf state. Bennett was greeted at the airport by the King and Crown Prince Salman bin Hamad al-Khalifa, also prime minister, and a guard of honor playing Hatikvah, the Israeli national anthem which celebrates a “free people in our land, the land of Zion and Jerusalem.”

The Bennett visit was the outcome of the signing on September 15, 2020, brokered by President Donald Trump of the Abraham Accords, normalizing relations between Israel and two Arab countries, the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain, a historic

achievement for mutual recognition and increased cooperation between the three countries on trade and investment, and on defense against aggression by Iran.

The visit was a convincing refutation of a new report, "International, Israel's Apartheid against Palestinians: Cruel System of Domination and Crime against Humanity." It was issued by Amnesty International, an international non-governmental organization focused on human rights. It concludes that Israeli laws, policies, and institutional practices regarding Palestinians amount to a regime of oppression and domination defined as apartheid under international law. In the Rome statute of International Criminal Court 1998 apartheid is defined by inhumane acts by one racial group over any other racial group with the intention of maintaining its regime.

The biased Amnesty Report has been dismissed by objective commentators as a libel, smear, and antisemitic. It ignores the reality that 20 per cent of Israel's population are Arabs, who have equality under the law and are members of the Knesset and Supreme Court. Most Palestinians are under the governance of the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank or Hamas in Gaza. In a dramatic announcement Mansour Abbas, Israeli Arab, leader of the United Arab party list which controls four seats in the Knesset and supports the present Israeli coalition, declared he would not use the word "apartheid" to describe relations between Jews and Arabs in Israel.

The Bennett visit exemplifies the reality that a common patriarch is shared by the Middle East contending parties, Abraham whose descendants share the origins of Judaism, Islam, and Christianity. The children of Israel descend from Abraham's son Isaac and his wife Sarah, and Arabs stem from Ishmael, half-brother of Isaac, and his handmaiden Hagar. The two brothers were distant but were reconciled briefly at the burial of their father.

At this moment of changing priorities in the Middle East, it is time for reconciliation again for cousins if not brothers, to advance a culture of peace among the religions based on mutual understanding and co-existence. Three factors are important; mutual recognition; the need for economic development; and opposition of all parties to Iran threats. Occasional meetings and visits have taken place. The Oslo Peace Accords were in 1993. Prime ministers, Yitzhak Rabin and Shimon Peres went to Muscat, then foreign minister Tzipi Livni to Oman in 2008, and Bibi Netanyahu visited Sultan Qaboos in Oman in 2018.

Official ostracism was declining, and though full peace and normalization are not in sight, the ice had been broken to some extent. For some years, Israel took part in trade missions in the capitals of some Arab countries.

A new chapter, backed and sponsored by the U.S. began on August 23, 2020 when a joint statement was signed by the State of Israel, the United Arab Emirates, UAE, at the White House, to normalize relations. This was the first public normalization of relations between an Arab country and Israel since that with Jordan in 1994. It was followed on September 15, 2020, by normalization ties between Israel and Bahrain. Thus, the Abraham Accords were agreed.

The countries recognized each state's sovereignty and agreed to establish embassies. Conscious of the need to resolve the Israel -Palestinian conflict, Israel agreed to suspend plans to annex parts of the West Bank, though Gulf monarchies presently pay little more than lip service to the Palestinian cause.

The normalization process continues. Prime Minister Netanyahu had already met in February 2020 with Sudan's head of state Abdel Fattah al-burhan in Uganda. On October 23, 2020. Sudan, a country that hosted Osama bin Laden, agreed to normalize relations with Israel.

The U.S. removed Sudan from the list of countries sponsoring terrorism. The link with Israel has led to cooperation in agriculture, technology, migration. Then on December 10, 2020, Morocco agreed to establish full diplomatic relations with Israel while the U.S. agreed to recognize Morocco's claim to rule over territory in the western Sahara.

The misguided Amnesty International should note some of the changing events, political, economic, and strategic. Israel opened embassy in Abu Dhabi, and Israeli president Isaac Herzog travelled to the UAE. The first official flight took place between Israel and UAE. In April 2021, the UAE air force flew alongside Israeli fighter jets in training exercises in Greece, practicing various tactics. The chief of the UAE air force attended Israel's Blue Flag aerial exercise on October 21, 2021. Similarly, maritime collaboration between Israel, Arab, and U.S. forces is taking place. An Israeli military officer will be posted in Bahrain where there is already Israeli investments in a number of sectors. Biweekly flights between the two countries are beginning.

In November 2021, Israel, UAE, and Bahrain together with U.S. naval forces central command, and a coalition of others, took part in a five-day naval exercises with the object to enhance collaboration to safeguard freedom of navigation and the free flow of trade and to meet the aggression of Iran in the strait of Hormuz.

A growing menace in the Persian Gulf has been the use by Iran of anti-ship mines, of which it has a store of 6,000, which hinder oil tankers from using Arab ports. The U.S. Navy force of minesweepers is limited, and consequently Israel state-owned defense contractors are designing navy vessels capable of mine detection and anti-submarine warfare. After events in Afghanistan, Israel-Arab defense cooperation with the U.S., is crucial to deter Iranian aggression.

Commerce increases. Israel began importing aluminum from

Bahrain and the two countries are signing an agreement that allows the transshipment of goods arriving by sea in Bahrain on to planes going to Israel. A network of trade pacts is developing. The UAE and Israel have exchanged official ambassadors, and foreign minister Yair Lapid has visited UAE as have many Israeli tourists. Commercially, the UAE has invested in Israel's offshore natural gas extraction.

Economic relations are increasing. A major UAE sovereign wealth fund has invested about \$100 million in venture capital into Israel's technology sector. Trade in 2022 is expected to reach \$2 billion, up from \$250 million annually before normalization. Already in 2005 Bahrain had abandoned its boycott of Israel in exchange for a free trade agreement with the U.S.

In September 2017, Bahrain denounced the Arab League boycott of Israel, and agreed its citizens could visit Israel. The two countries have now agreed to recognize each other's sovereignty and set up embassies. Agreements are planned on issues, investment, tourism, direct flights., security, telecommunications, energy, health care, culture and the environment.

Politically, it is clear that for Arab countries the fear of Iran and its armed proxies is more consequential than resolution of the Palestinian problem. What is needed are useful actions to end Palestinian rejectionism and obduracy and moves towards normalization by the Arab League, now containing 22 members including three African countries, Saudi Arabia, and Palestinians represented by the PLO.

In 2002 the League adopted a peace initiative, proposing normalization of relations with Israel, but it was inadequate since it insisted on certain factors: Israel withdraw from all occupied territories including the Golan Heights, recognize Palestinian independence in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, and with East Jerusalem as capital, and agree to a just

solution for Palestinian refugees. However, it was a welcome sign that in September 2020, the League did not condemn UAE decision to normalize ties with Israel. But the League needs to go beyond beneficial sentiments, to denounce boycott of Israel, and advocate amicable normalization. It must overcome the negativism of terrorist Hamas and the inept Palestinian leader Mahmoud Abbas, now 85, in the 17th year of his four-year term as president. Even the hopelessly biased Amnesty International might agree.