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The Abraham Accords Two Years On: A New Middle East?

Fireside Chat with Fireside Chat with **Abdulla Al Khalifa, Undersecretary for Political Affairs, Bahrain**

Moderator: **Jeffrey Goldberg, Editor-in-Chief, *The Atlantic***

Jeffrey Goldberg ([00:00](#)):

Thank you very much Mr. Minister for, for joining us. Um, I am curious obviously, to, to hear your reaction to anything that minister Gantz had to say, um, but for those of you who don't know, um, you you've been deeply involved in the Abraham accord from the beginning, visited Israel multiple times. Um, again, from, from the perspective of people who've been watching the middle east for a long time, it's it is still astonishing. The idea that you would have your country and other countries in the Gulf, especially would have open relations with Israel. And the large question that I'd love you to answer is what was the mentality shift in the leadership of Bahrain that allowed you to say, you know what, Israel's in the middle east, and we're gonna have relations with it. So maybe you could just start with there.

Abdulla Al Khalifa ([00:57](#)):

Thank you, Jeff. And thanks to the Aspen Institute for having me. I'm delighted to be here and to answer your question, Jeff, I believe Bahrain under the leadership of his Ingham binal Khalifa, with the support of his Royal Highness, crown prince and prime minister, San Muhammad has always been advocating for peace and coexistence in the region. And Bahrain has for centuries been a successful model of peaceful coexistence whereby we had Muslims, Christians, Jews, Hindus, Bahais living side by side for centuries in Bahrain. So why not have this being broader across the region? Australia is part of the region and for remain, hence the decision to sign the, a Abrahamic, accord and establish bilateral diplomatic relations with Israel requires immense amount of, of courage age and many were watching with apprehension, some with fear and others with hatred. And that is why we have been working tirelessly for the past 22 months with our colleagues in Australia, the 30th of September, 2020 after the grand ceremony of the white house, whereby the a Abraham accord was signed. I attended a us sponsored meeting with a number of senior officials. So we congratulated each other and they asked me, so when are we signing the peace treaty?

Abdulla Al Khalifa ([02:42](#)):

I told them what peace treaty. They said, you know, the peace treaty between Australia and Bahrain should be signed. I told them, gentlemen, we just signed the Abraham Accords. Why do we need the peace treaty? They said, well, of course we signed it with Jordan. We signed with Egypt. We should sign it with Bahrain as well. I told them, please do not like at Bahrain from the same lens, we were never at war. We were never in direct confrontation. We don't share borders. I don't. In fact, we will not sign a

peace treaty with Israel. To us. This is just a normal bilateral diplomatic relations. And we just sign it with a simple joint communicate between the foreign ministers. It took them some time to get that around their head. A few weeks later, they came back and said, well, is it fine if we call it a joint, communicate to establish bilateral diplomatic peaceful and friendly ations. I said, of course

Speaker 3 (04:01):

<laugh>

Abdulla Al Khalifa (04:03):

And it was signed and Bahrain during the first visit of a senior official Pharmac Ray, Mr. Mayor Shabbat, the former national security advisor. And we have been working very closely, particularly with the minister of foreign I affairs into developing this relations and it continues to develop.

Jeffrey Goldberg (04:19):

So no one had briefed the Israelis that they hadn't actually been at war with Bahrain is what you're saying. They had, they had somehow missed that detail. Bahrain rain, Bahrain had never participated in a war against Israel as an Arab state.

Abdulla Al Khalifa (04:31):

Well, you must to ask Mr. G that's question. I believe <laugh> yeah.

Jeffrey Goldberg (04:35):

For his return to the stage after this, we'll go to that. Um, the, uh, talk about this in this, in the same context that I asked minister GS, the, the context of Iran minister G said something interesting, said that there several countries in the middle east that are under equivalent sort of threat from Iran, does Bahrain feel like it's under an existential threat from Iran and specifically its nuclear program

Abdulla Al Khalifa (05:04):

Iran for the past four decades has been acting with impunity with grass who's neighbors, including my country. Bahrain is a peaceful country. It has always called for a peaceful region and coexistence. Iran is an important neighbor and region, but you would expect Iran to be a responsible member of the international community, meaning it would have to respect its neighbors respects its borders and to refrain from interfering againsts domestic affairs and the recent summit posted in Jeda the security and development summit. His Maje say the king specifically stressed the continuous danger of the interference and domestic affairs of other countries in the region being the biggest challenge in the region. So how to address: that now everybody is following Vienna and the toxin Vienna. But when we speak about the J C P O a, which is a very critical portfolio, I believe it should not be discussed in separate boardrooms that would shy away from mentioning the common threat that the region is facing October 9th, 2006, the world walk up to the news that North Korea tested its first nuclear weapon. It was a reality that the world still is facing its consequences. What if one day all of us wake up to the news that Iran has tested its first nuclear weapon and face it as a reality. So I believe addressing the issue now when there is an opportunity is much better than addressing it later when it's too late,

Jeffrey Goldberg (07:08):

Do you therefore advocate preemptive military action against Iran to prevent it from going nuclear and would Bahrain participate in such military?

Abdulla Al Khalifa (07:18):

We have been following all these developments very carefully, obviously dealing with the matter diplomatically would be a priority. We have seen how the Iranian regime is ignoring the current efforts and respecting expecting what it should abide by. But we do believe with the continuous ignorance and the continuous developing of the nuclear program in Iran would cause the region and it would, uh, affect obviously its neighbors in a very dramatic manner.

Jeffrey Goldberg ([07:56](#)):

I'll take that as an ambiguous maybe. Is that fair?

Abdulla Al Khalifa ([08:00](#)):

Fair enough.

Jeffrey Goldberg ([08:01](#)):

Okay. On the Abraham Accords, the same question that I asked minister Gant, this is more personal in a kind of way for you, for the Royal family, for UAE, palet many Palestinians feel betrayed by the agreement between Israel and Arab states, an agreement that was made without, uh, without condition or without a specific promise to bring about the creation of a Palestinian state. Um, obviously the climate is very different than four decades ago when countries broke relations with Egypt when Saddat went to, went to Israel. But how do you answer the Palestinian charge that you are more interested in Iran or you're more interested in high tech business with Israel than you are in bringing about some kind of fair solution for the Palestinians,

Abdulla Al Khalifa ([08:57](#)):

Supporting the Palestinians and establishing their own independent state with east of Jerusalem, as capital has always been in the forefront of foreign policy, supporting and consolidation with our, our partners under the, our peace initiative and continues to do so. We continue in Bahrain to enjoy very strong relation with the Palestinians and Bahrain will provide any support anywhere, anytime to do so. We do believe that establishing relations with Israel does not mean abandoning the Palestinians. In fact, on the contrary, we believe this would enhance all the efforts in reaching that goal. This has been the longest standing out agenda of the UN 70 plus years, what has been achieved. So we believe that establishing those, that establishment installation would certainly enhance that. And we continue to coordinate closely on that matter.

Jeffrey Goldberg ([09:57](#)):

Uh, stay on this subject for, for one more, for one more minute, do you have influence over Hamas

Abdulla Al Khalifa ([10:06](#)):

When you say you meaning

Jeffrey Goldberg ([10:08](#)):

Bahrain, not you personally <laugh>, that would be very interesting, but Bahrain and UAE and some of the more moderate Gulf states, I ask that because if you can move a MOAs to at a slightly, even slightly more moderate position, you might help break the log jam.

Abdulla Al Khalifa ([10:30](#)):

There's a limitation to what Bahrain could do or to what anyone could do to support the Palestinians. If they do not support themselves, we would have to see a United Palestinian national front for them to know what exactly do they want instead of us looking into rather than a two stay solution. It's it looks

more like a three stay solution nowadays. So there's the limitation to what could be done from our end in Bahrain, but at the end of the day, whatever the Palestinians agree unanimously to achieve, we are more than allowed to support that.

Jeffrey Goldberg ([11:10](#)):

Do you have influence over Israel now? And I asked that for a very specific reason. Let's say my apologies to minister Gant and prime minister Lappe, let's say Benjamin Netanyahu comes back into power. Uh, he brings a very right wing settler coalition with him. Uh, how do you believe that you in, in combination with other Arab states can move the Israeli government to a moderate position on settlement construction? For instance,

Abdulla Al Khalifa ([11:41](#)):

I don't believe it's a matter of influence as much as it is a matter of trust and confidence, which we have been building with Israel for the past 22 months. And I believe with an open channel of communication with transparency, with openness, this will certainly help us and support us in moving forward. In any matter one could imagine the vision of peace and prosperity is shared both by Israel and Bahrain and choosing the path of peace towards the more stable and secure region is the way forward. And I believe what has been achieved in the past 22 months between Bahrain and Israel is remarkable to shed light and a few, we have 32 bilateral visits between Bahrain Australia. The most notable was the visit of the former former minister oft ballot and the current prime minister J Lapid and the visit of minister G should I say the next

Speaker 4 ([12:53](#)):

<laugh>?

Jeffrey Goldberg ([12:58](#)):

This is called buck rainy interference in domestic Israeli political affairs, clearly something, no one expected,

Abdulla Al Khalifa ([13:07](#)):

No way anyway, where he signed a historic defense cooperation MOU with Bahrain. The first of its kind with an Arab country, we have 40 MOU and agreements in the various scope of fields. And we have interestingly signed a joint warm piece strategy. A 10 year strategy would have, which have identified the way forward with Israel. It has specifically identified areas of interest to develop and deliver tangible results, namely in innovation and technology, trade, investment food and water security, healthcare education, tourism, and a couple of others. This was signed on the sidelines of the historic ne summit last March, which was an event hosted by Israel and attended by foreign ministers from Bahrain, the us, the UAE, Morocco, and Egypt. It was the gathering of like-minded countries and region interested in developing stability and prosperity in the region and to upscale the level of cooperative coordination in the various fields of, of areas. And I think it was

Abdulla Al Khalifa ([14:32](#)):

A step to conceptualize a new regional network and to enhance that we hosted just three weeks to go in Bahrain. The first meeting of the student committee for the Naga forum. I had the opportunity to share the meeting along with my dear colleague, <inaudible> the DG of the Israeli MFA. And we had a very fine representation from the us, my dear colleague guide lamb from the state department where we

discussed the framework of the Niue forum, which I believe would be the next big thing in the region. We have discussed the formation of the NIGA forum where it'll have four main bodies, namely, an annual ministerial meeting. The presidency student committee formulated by senior officials from the ministries of foreign affairs and working groups. We have agreed on six working groups that would work on delivering tangible results, namely on food and water security, healthcare education, and coexistence to tourism, clean energy and regional security. So keep an eye open until the next ministerial meeting where, uh, bigger announcements would be made.

Jeffrey Goldberg (15:57):

Uh, we have time for one or two quick questions. Um, just raise your hand and we'll wait for a mic. Yes. Or over here. Yeah. Yeah. Just stand. Could you wait for the mic?

Speaker 5 (16:11):

Hi, uh, I'm Harry Kagan. Um, what do you see as the biggest stumbling block going forward for warm and very friendly and enthusiastic relations between Bahrain and Israel and what's the, uh, biggest asset to those kinds of relations going forward?

Abdulla Al Khalifa (16:27):

I'm actually not aware of any stumbling stone moving forward with Australia in the past 22 months. Speaking about Bahrain matters have been moving smoothly. I'm not only speaking about leadership to leadership government, to government, but also people to people. We have a direct line, our national career, Gulf flies back and forth, and we look forward into developing further cooperation that would bring our peoples together, whether it's education, whether it's tourism research and other matters that we believe that would enhance the bilateral relations. We have found nothing in Australia, but openness, enthusiasm, and support from all levels and all across the state of Australia. And we very much appreciate that.

Jeffrey Goldberg (17:17):

Um, let me ask you one final question provoked by this question. Um, the, your very large neighbor has according to various reports, warm, constructive, but secret relations with Israel. So speaking of stumbling blocks, what is keeping Saudi Arabia from recognizing Israel and entering into the Abraham Accords? Um, obviously the interests, uh, on Iran at least are shared,

Abdulla Al Khalifa (17:51):

Well, I can't speak on behalf of Saudi Arabia, but in Bahrain, the way we do business is over the table and not under the table. And when we decided in Bahrain to build the relationship with Israel, this is the relationship that we are not shying away from. We are developing it because we truly believe that this is the way forward. We have selected and Bahrain having the path of peace and prosperity, and we are fully determined to build on that. Now mind you, Jeff, all of this happened in the midst of a pandemic in 22 months. Imagine what would happen in the next five years and what would be achieved in the next decade.

Jeffrey Goldberg (18:44):

That's an unusually hopeful note for a middle east conversation, but thank you very, very much. I appreciate it. Thank you very much for coming.