

DUBOWITZ: Hi, thanks so much for joining us today, I’m Mark Dubowitz, I’m the Chief Executive of the Foundation for Defense of Democracies in Washington, D.C., and I’m really looking forward to this timely and important discussion. I was very pleased to be at the White House last month on the South Lawn for the signing of the Abraham Accords, which codifies the normalization between Israel, the UAE, and Bahrain. And the UAE-Israel normalization agreement, specifically commits the two countries to extensive cooperation in economic, scientific, social fields as well as military, intelligence, and security. And we’re really seeing this relationship developing in ways that are much deeper and warmer than the relationships even from the peace agreements between Egypt, Israel and Jordan.

We’re grateful to have with us today a key individual who was responsible for spearheading this historic diplomatic breakthrough, Ambassador Yousef Al Otaiba, the UAE’s Ambassador to Washington.

FDD puts on these events all year. We don’t take any foreign government funding, and as a result we depend on the generosity of private individuals. This event and our program on Middle East peace and normalization is underwritten by The Shillman Foundation, and we’re very grateful to Dr. Bob Shillman for his support.

With that, I’m very pleased to introduce our special guest. Ambassador Al Otaiba is well known in Washington, so well known that everyone knows him by his first name, Yousef. He’s been Ambassador since 2008, he’s a minister in the Emeriti government, and he’s played a critical role in deepening and expanding the cooperation between the United States and the UAE. And we’re really looking forward to having a discussion with him about this historic breakthrough. So, with that, I’d like to welcome Ambassador Al Otaiba.

Mr. Ambassador, thank you so much for joining us. It’s a real pleasure to have you, and obviously to talk about what are truly profound and historic events in the region. So, first of all, I really want to wish you congratulations and mabrouk for all you’ve done to spearhead this, really, normalization wave that seems to be crashing over the Middle East in so many positive ways, and in such a difficult year for everybody, it’s great to have something to be optimistic about.

So, let’s start with how it all came about. I mean, I’d love to know from your perspective, a little bit of a tick tock of how this came about. I recall you wrote an op-ed in *Yedioth* on June 12th, I think it was. At that point, things looked pretty hopeless from the perspective of a lot of people with respect to both normalization and the Israeli plan to move forward with annexation. Three months later I was on the South Lawn with you celebrating normalization, so how did that all happen?

AL OTAIBA: Thank you, Mark. It’s great to be with you and thank you for having me. So, I think you know that you are one of the first people to plant this idea in our head. You planted that seed early on. I don’t know how seriously it was as part of the considerations and the debates and the negotiations that we had, but you were one of the first people to raise the idea of normalization with Israel. And to be honest, it’s something we’ve always discussed. It’s something that we’re not hiding from. We’ve been having debates inside the UAE about what normalization with Israel would look like and when would it happen, and it was just an ongoing discussion.

I think you saw that over the last couple of years, that there has been sort of a consistent pattern of Israeli athletes participating in sports tournaments. The Israeli team participated in the Special Olympics World Games about a year and a half ago. I was there the opening ceremony when they walked in and the parade of nations with everyone else. Then you saw that Israel was allowed to have a pavilion in Expo 2020, which ultimately got delayed one more year. So, you see all these overt sort of cooperation initiatives with Israel that are very public, they’re very blatant, that we’re not shying away from.

So, I think we were on a glide path to normalizing with Israel. Nobody knew when it would happen. It could have happened two years from now. It could have happened five years from now. The tick tock of why it happened now, if that’s your question, is it happened now because of the annexation debate. We decided that if Israel proceeds with annexation, it’s going to be very hard for us to normalize. It’s going to be very hard for us to even have the Israeli pavilion at Expo. All of these things you saw us doing with Israel was going to be put at risk.

That’s exactly what we said in the article. We said, “Hey guys, think carefully about this. If you really are keen to develop your relationship with Arab countries, annexation is going to interfere with that. Annexation is actually going to sabotage that.” So, we were trying to get the message directly to Israelis, to think carefully about what choice they make, because it will have an impact on the other thing that they want to do. If you really want to annex, you won’t be able to normalize, but if you normalize, maybe we can take annexation off the table. And ultimately that was the deal that was created.

You’re right. I think the op-ed was June 12th, and we really started having serious negotiations with the White House kind of early July, right after the annexation deadline expired July 1st. There was an idea a couple of years ago that was presented about doing a non-belligerency agreement with Israel, and it was offered to four different countries, UAE being one of them. So, at first, we offered to do a non-belligerency agreement in exchange for no annexation. Then we decided that instead of doing non-belligerency, let’s do full normalization. But what does that look like? How does it get executed? That process took about five weeks of pretty intense negotiations with the White House, but to be honest, the White House was incredibly cooperative, helpful and got us over the deadline and made sure it happened the right way.

So, I think diplomacy here prevailed, and I think three months ago the debate was, how much is Israel going to annex? The debate now is, okay, who else is going to normalize with Israel? And I think we just changed the dynamics, we changed the narrative and we created a win-win for everyone.

DUBOWITZ: Yousef, it seems that America really played a critical role in this. I mean, my sense back in June, you had written this op-ed in *Yedioth*. I think there was probably understandable frustration on your part, on the part of others that despite this offer of normalization, as you said, it was going to be blocked by what seemed to be Prime Minister Netanyahu’s commitment to move forward on annexation.

Then there was a recognition that to get beyond this block, the U.S. had to be involved, specifically the President and obviously Jared Kushner, and get them involved and really try to create a sort of a win-win-win for all three leaders. President Trump gets a diplomatic victory on this, Prime Minister Netanyahu, I think, gets to climb down from a tree that he’s gone up without a ladder. My sense from the Israelis was that the Prime Minister really wasn’t that enthusiastic about moving forward with annexation, but worried about his political right, and was looking for a way out of it. And MBZ, your leader, could rightly say, “I’m the one who suspended annexation and I’m the one who’s leading this incredible normalization.” To what extent do you think the U.S. role here was indispensable, or do you think this would have happened without U.S. involvement?

AL OTAIBA: It would have been much harder. It would have been really a lot more difficult. I think having the U.S. on board and holding both hands and making sure this gets done right provided certain assurances to us, provided certain assurances to the Israelis. I don’t think this could have been done without the U.S. And not only could have it not been done, I mean, this particular White House, Jared Kushner, Avi Berkowitz, Miguel Correa, I mean, I’ve spent a lot of time with those guys in the last couple of months, and honestly, they’re just as responsible for getting this accomplished

as we were. They’ve walked us through every step of this process and got us to the outcome that we needed, so a lot of credit goes to the White House here for getting this done.

DUBOWITZ: There’s been a lot of focus on the normalization side of the deal. Obviously, a lot of excitement in the UAE and Israel and the United States about what normalization looks like, and I think people have been surprised by how quickly normalization has moved forward. I want to talk a little bit about that, because I think there’s a tremendous amount of interest in that and really a huge amount of enthusiasm.

But before talking about that, I want to talk a little bit about the annexation piece of it, because it sounded like the deal was a suspension of annexation. My understanding is that that phrase specifically wasn’t written into the Abraham Accord, and correct me if I’m wrong if it was, but why only suspension and what were you thinking as a negotiator in accepting suspension rather than termination of annexation, and how do you think this is going to play out over the next few years?

AL OTAIBA: So first, I’m a terrible negotiator. I’m not sure I’m the guy you want to send in to negotiate deals on your behalf, especially if there’s any financial compensation involved. Don’t send me at any point. I think we got the assurances we needed from the United States, and I think we kicked the can down the road long enough to create a new reality. So, if you ask me today, in 10 years from now is annexation going to be on the table? I’m going to say, “I probably don’t think so,” for a variety of reasons, some political here, some political there.

But I think what we’ve managed to do, and I’m really optimistic that we’re going to start seeing soon, is you’re going to create a wave of positive energy, a wave of positive momentum on trade, on investment, on understanding, on tourism, on technology, on healthcare, on AI, that annexation will seem less appealing, whether it’s a political move or whether it’s an ideological move.

I believe next the questions are going to be, “well, who else is going to normalize?” And if you are really keen on getting more countries to normalize, you won’t be able to annex. That won’t be part of the debate. Again, I go back to the original article. You either want more countries to normalize with Israel, and that’s the benefit to Israel and to the United States and to the region, or you want to annex. And I think we’ve just completely changed the momentum in a different direction, so I’m honestly not concerned that annexation is going to come back anytime soon. I know we have a commitment from the U.S. for a certain time period. We’ve agreed to keep that time period private, but I’m honestly not worried.

DUBOWITZ: Yeah. I mean, judging by public opinion polls in Israel recently, and obviously public opinion can change, but the overwhelming number of Israelis are supporting normalization over annexation. So, I think that’s certainly a positive sign from your perspective, from America’s perspective in validating your assumptions. And by the way, the best negotiators always pretend that they’re the worst negotiators. It’s part of being a good negotiator, so we don’t believe you when you say that.

But I do want to move on to the normalization piece of it. So, we spend a lot of time talking about the great opportunities in tech, in healthcare and in culture, and I think we’ve already seen some remarkable developments on that front. Talk to us a little bit about the military and intel side of this. Where do you see opportunities with Israel on military intelligence, cooperation, even beyond what has taken place in the past, if you can talk about that. Then I want to sort of move onto the topic that obviously has been in the press a lot, and that is UAE/U.S. military cooperation and what the Abraham Accords mean for that.

AL OTAIBA: Yeah. So, on military, on intelligence, on security, I think we have a new opportunity. The opportunity is there's a lot of things we can do together with the United States. It was difficult to have this trilateral working group on a variety of subjects in the past. It was just challenging. I think this is going to make it a lot easier. We can have a three-way working group on intel sharing, on security cooperation, on dealing with threats in the region, on technology sharing in the intel world.

So, when you have a triangle between the United States, Israel, and the UAE and we have similar threats and similar interests, it makes cooperating in public on these subjects much, much easier. So, we've opened the door to doing things openly that we weren't able to do before, so I think this is only going to improve. You want to talk about the military acquisition part?

DUBOWITZ: Yeah. Before we go to that, I want to just expand a little bit more on the military cooperation. So, two of my colleagues at FDD, Brad Bowman and Jacob Nagel, Brad's former U.S. Army, Jacob Nagel, Israeli Army and former Israeli National Security Advisor, wrote a piece recently proposing an idea of expanding the joint U.S./UAE Iron Union military exercises that are scheduled to take place in January, and including Israel in those exercises, either as a full participant or as an observer, just as a way of beginning to sort of springboard and enhance military cooperation. What do you think of the idea in general, and is that what you have in mind when you start to think about how you could be cooperating with the Israelis?

AL OTAIBA: We've done these kinds of things in the past. We've come to exercises here in the U.S. and sometimes in Europe, I think we've done one in Greece where Israel participated. When you get invited to go to a party, you go to the party, you kind of don't ask the host who else is invited. You either show up, or you don't show up. So, when we go to these exercises in the past, sometimes Israel's there, sometimes they're not. So, it's not the first time we would have ever done that.

If we are talking about a strictly U.S./UAE/Israel Military exercise, I mean, I don't think it's off the table. Again, it has to be done with certain requirements. It has to be done in a certain way. It has to be done with the militaries cooperating. I don't think it's off the table, but I don't believe we've done one in the past, just the three of us.

DUBOWITZ: Yeah. I don't think you have, and I think that would be really interesting opportunity. It'd also be an interesting signal, I think, to some common adversaries in the region if we began to see a joint, U.S./UAE/Israel exercise. So, what I'm hearing you say, if the Americans invite the Israelis to Iron Union, that wouldn't necessarily be something that you would strongly object to.

AL OTAIBA: No. And I think we can even open up a little more, you also have Bahrain, you have Egypt, you have Jordan. Could be all four countries that have peace agreements with Israel. I mean, you can look at it from a variety of different setups, but yeah, I don't see any reason not to do it.

DUBOWITZ: Let's get to military acquisition. So obviously a lot of discussion of the F-35. I wanted to ask you first, the essential question in my mind, Yousef, is why does the UAE want the F-35? I mean, is it for operational reasons? Is it for political strategic reasons? Is it for all of the above? Obviously, you've got advanced U.S. fighter jets are ready. The F-35 clearly has some significant competitive advantages over the fighter jets that your pilots are already in, but tell us a little bit more, what is it about the F-35 that's so important to the UAE?

AL OTAIBA: So why does Israel want the F-35?

DUBOWITZ: Well look, I don't sit with – I'm not a member of Israeli Air Force, and I don't sit where [Amikam] Norkin does, who's the head of the Israeli Air Force, but I would imagine for operational reasons, if the Israelis were ever to take out Iran's nuclear facilities and bomb Fordow, it'd probably be useful to have a stealth plane, like an F-35 as part of the bombing mission. And then the question is could you imagine UAE pilots joining Israeli, and/or American pilots in taking out Iran's nuclear facilities? That would, I think, be the Israeli reason for having that plane.

AL OTAIBA: The main reason we have been – first, just to know, I think it's important for everyone to understand that we've been trying to acquire the F-35 for six years. Six years. So, this is not a new purchase. This was not a condition of the Abraham Accords. This was not something that was done in a back room with this deal. We have been asking for this aircraft for the past six years. Some other things we've been asking for since the George Bush administration. So, it's important to note that these kinds of military acquisitions that we're trying to get now are not new deals. They're not something, “Oh, by the way, we need this now.” No, these are things that we've been trying to acquire for a long time, and in most cases, they have been rejected because of QME. So, we are now pushing forward on things we've been trying to get for a long time. QME is something that is a U.S. law that is in regards to Israeli qualitative military edge.

So, when we say we need this, then the conversation goes to the U.S. and Israel, and they have to agree that this does not affect Israel's Qualitative Military Edge, which is what I believe is actually happening right as we speak, right now. So, they have to resolve this. I think the Abraham Accords creates a much better environment and landscape for these sales to go through. And we're still in consultations, we're still going back and forth about what it is exactly we need and why we need it, but I think we're in a much better environment to get these approved if they actually materialize. And we've been flying the F-16s coming up on 20 years now. So, for us, it's just a simple, natural upgrade, and for the operational angle, I think the F-35 is very important for us from a deterrent standpoint. It's very important to have something like an F-35 that deters your adversaries, and plus interoperability.

Since 1991, Mark, we've participated in six coalitions with the United States. Six. No Arab country has ever done that, and we're only one in three countries all around the world that has participated in all six. From Desert Storm to Somalia, Libya, Afghanistan, ISIS, you name it, and so when we deploy with the United States, it's very important to have U.S. technology for interoperability reasons, and if we need deterrents, we always come to the United States first and say, “Hey, this is what we need and this is why we need it.” So, the two reasons kind of complement each other. We want to protect the UAE. We're very proud of what we've built there, whether it's the economy, the society, the people who live there safely and comfortably, we want to make sure that country is protected, but we also serve and deploy with the United States all the time. And so, you don't want us flying in with Russian or Chinese jets. So, these are the reasons that I think it makes sense for the UAE to acquire the F-35.

DUBOWITZ: Right. So, the arguments that I've heard from both Americans and Israelis against the F-35 acquisition amounts to essentially this: The first is there's some cautionary tales in the past about the U.S. selling advanced fighter jets or including certain countries in advanced fighter jet programs. So, the two cautionary tales are obviously the Shah of Iran and Turkey, and obviously different governments, different circumstances, but it amounts to essentially this. We've sold advanced fighter jets to the Shah of Iran, then there was the Islamic Revolution, and Khomeini and the Ayatollahs and the Revolutionary Guards took over, and those fighter jets ended up in the hands of the Islamic Republic of Iran's Air Force. In the case of Turkey, Turkey is, I believe, one of the initial members of the F-35 program. In a very different Turkey, a pro-American, from an Israeli perspective, pro-Israel Turkey, very strong relationships with both Jerusalem and Washington.

And lo and behold, now we’ve got Recep Erdoğan and a Muslim Brotherhood government in Ankara, and thankfully, as a result of Congress, Erdoğan has been blocked from the F-35 program, at least for now. So those are kind of the two examples that people pulled out as cautionary tales. So, they asked the question, well, right now we love the Emiratis, we greatly admire MBZ, but who knows? History is a difficult and complex phenomenon and things happen, and things particularly happen in the Middle East. So, the question is, are we heading down the path of another Turkey or another Iran if we sell the F-35 to Abu Dhabi?

That would be number one, and I’d like you to address that, and I imagine I know what you’re going to say, but I want you to say it, because I think it’s important for people to hear it, but while you’re addressing that, I think the other issue is precedent. So, we have no problem selling the F-35 to the Emiratis, the argument goes, but then it establishes a precedent, because then the Saudis, when they normalize with Israel are going to want the F-35. The Bahrainis may want it as well. The Sudanese probably can’t afford it, but then theoretically, they would be available to them. The Moroccans, the Omanis. Pretty soon you’ve got F-35s all over the Middle East, on airfields controlled by governments that are more or less stable.

AL OTAIBA: On the precedent one, I think it’s a little easier. That’s an American decision. America can decide who they want to sell it to and who they don’t want to sell it to. That’s a very simple, this is your shop, this is your product. You can make that decision unilaterally. Very simple. So, I can’t comment on that, but on the Turkey and Iran question, I remember talking once with a former CEO of ExxonMobil, and he was negotiating an oil deal in the UAE, and I was in his office in Dallas and he said, “You know, Yousef, the deals we get from you guys in the UAE are not very – we don’t make a lot of money. We make very little money.” I remember the term he used. He says, “These deals are ‘skinny.’ They’re ‘skinny deals.’ Exxon makes a lot more money in other deals,” and I said, “Yes, you make a lot more money in other countries because the risk is higher. Those governments can change. The field can get taken over by somebody.”

I mean, I can list a series of countries that are very wealthy and have huge oil production, but companies are very much at risk because of the turbulent politics. The reason big oil corporations don’t make a lot of money in the UAE is because there’s no risk. You’re going to be there for a long time. Concessions are 10, 20, 30 years, but there is no risk. Whatever amount you get the day you sign the deal is the same amount of money you’re going to get the day you sign out of the deal, and so you have to understand, while there is obvious political turbulence, you can’t take that and apply it to the UAE. In 50 years, we’ve had zero political turbulence in the UAE. We’ve had one transition of power in 2004 when Sheikh Zayed passed away, and it was the smoothest, most seamless transfer of power I’ve seen in my adult life. It happened in 36 hours. So, no, I think people who use that argument, Mark, to be quite honest, are using that argument because they don’t want to do it. They know that UAE politically is very stable and it’s very consistent, but they’re just finding excuses to make the argument against it.

DUBOWITZ: Okay. So, Yousef, let’s move beyond the F-35, but let’s talk about Turkey. Let’s talk about Iran. So, judging from the reaction to the Abraham Accords, you were probably pretty pleased in general, about how positive that reaction was, the bipartisan support for it in the United States, certainly the support from a number of your Arab allies, from the Europeans, from Asian allies. I mean, if you can judge the success of something by who’s applauding it and who’s criticizing it, you probably did pretty well, but obviously two of the countries, or three of the countries, let’s talk about three of them that condemn the UAE in pretty stark terms and very threatening terms were Iran, Erdoğan’s Turkey, and Qatar. Let’s talk a little bit about the reaction of each of those countries. Give us your assessment of why they stand against the Abraham Accords and what does that mean for the sort of political evolution of the Middle East?

AL OTAIBA: I think it’s hard to explain why, other than I think that most of those three countries that you’ve mentioned sort of try to stand on a very religious ideological platform. It’s politically advantageous for them to say, “Oh, Jerusalem is ours and it belongs to all of us,” and there’s kind of a sort of religious platform where they make the argument from. It’s also important to note that all the other countries that supported it, Egypt, Bahrain, Jordan, even Saudi Arabia privately was supportive, and don’t forget Saudi Arabia allowed El Al to fly over Saudi Arabia and landed in Abu Dhabi which was a historical first. That’s never happened before, an Israeli plane flying over Saudi. So, it’s important to point out the irony of the difference between the countries that did support and the countries that attacked. I think in addition to the ideological factor, I can’t think of one thing that the Iranian model has provided of value to the region. Name one thing or one positive element that the Iranian system has provided the region? Has someone anywhere in our part of the world tried to emulate the Iranian revolutionary model in the last 40 years, whether it’s on energy or the economy or on the military side?

DUBOWITZ: Sadly, actually, Hezbollah and Lebanon and Shiite militias in Iraq or attempting to replicate that model, but I think to your point, not with great success in terms of providing for the welfare of their people.

AL OTAIBA: But that’s the Iranians trying to replicate a model that they have produced. I don’t see the Jordanians or the Egyptians going to look for case studies out of Iran, and unfortunately Turkey, I think, is going in the opposite direction. Turkey, which was once quite secular, had checks and balances, strong, independent military, strong legal system, all that has kind of faded away today, and it seems more ideological and radical than it ever was before. And then correlate the economies of both countries. Look at where their economies are. Look at where their currencies are. Look at where their markets are. People are actually noticing that the countries who are focused on their past, on ideology, on religion are not producing much, and the countries that are focused on the future are the ones who are making progress.

DUBOWITZ: No, that’s exactly right. I mean, certainly the Iranians, the Islamic Republic, as opposed to the Iranians, I mean my view is that if Iranians were actually free of the Islamic Republic, the majority of them would want to normalize with the UAE and with Israel and with the United States, but obviously under the dictatorial control of the mullahs, they don’t have that choice. So, they were to be expected. It was surprising, I think, for many who don’t follow Turkey closely to see Erdoğan and how caustic he was in condemning the UAE. Tell us a little bit more about what’s going on with Erdoğan, the AKP, the influence of the Muslim Brotherhood, this rivalry between the UAE and Turkey. What’s really happening? What should Americans be aware of with respect to the developments, both inside Turkey and in the region?

AL OTAIBA: So, our disagreement with Turkey is kind of philosophical. It’s the same thing we have with Qatar. It’s the fault line that I think the region is splitting into. It is countries that prefer a pragmatic, civil, forward looking government. Right? Talk about space programs, talk about AI, let’s invite the Pope, let’s send a probe to Mars. These are the kinds of things that we are focused on, right? And Turkey, Qatar, and to an extent, Iran is focused on Islam, on political Islam in the case of Turkey and Qatar or the Muslim Brotherhood, to be specific, and investing more in an ideological, radical model rather than a model that faces forward and looks towards the future. And sort of that, what I just described, is the fault line that separates the two camps in the Middle East today: Qatar, Turkey and Iran on one hand, and then the rest of us on the other hand.

DUBOWITZ: So, let me ask you a little bit more about Saudi, because obviously there’s been a higher discussion about who’s coming next, and I’d like to get your thoughts on who’s coming next with respect to normalization. I assume Saudi Arabia is not coming next. This is something that if it comes at all, comes in the future. What do you think is happening inside Saudi Arabia? I mean, are those fault lines that you described in the region, are those also internal fault lines within the Saudi kingdom? Is this a generational issue? Are there certain things that you think the Saudis need to see

from the United States and Israel before moving forward with normalization? They’ve taken positive steps. You outlined some of those with respect to facilitating normalization. They certainly seem to have been taking steps to normalize their people to the idea of embracing Jews and Christians and Israel and the West. What do you think it will take for the Saudis to actually cross that goal line and actually normalize with the Jewish state?

AL OTAIBA: So, you know, it’s always awkward for an ambassador of one country to comment on another country’s decision-making and their policies and so on. So, I’ll try to be general. First, I think we both know a decision like normalizing with Israel, in the environment we’re in, in the region we’re in, is never an easy decision. It is a difficult decision. You have to make it when you’re 100% confident. You have to make it when you feel that your people are behind you, when you feel that it’s the right moment. You have to check a lot of boxes before you’re able to make a decision like this. So, I think it’s important to note that even though the UAE and Bahrain made this decision and it was very well received, it’s still not an easy decision to make. That is a difficult, courageous decision on behalf of the leadership of the UAE and Bahrain.

Having said that, I think we just broke a big taboo, right? The last time anybody normalized or made a peace agreement with Israel was 26 years ago, and it was Jordan. 26 years where nothing happened, not one country normalized with Israel. But we did it first, Bahrain came next. I am positive that others will follow in their own time whenever they are ready. But Saudi internally is moving in the right direction. 70% of Saudi Arabia is under the age of 30. And so that 70% is seeing Saudi Arabia change in front of their own eyes. They are seeing driving. They’re seeing concerts. They’re seeing WWE. They’re seeing resorts. They’re seeing all kinds of things that they have never seen before, which is kind of what they ultimately want.

Last week, I was reading a really interesting survey that I will forward to you at some point. They surveyed young Arabs across the Middle East, from 17 different countries, all between the ages of 18 and 24. Really interesting to look at the data that comes from Saudi, especially on things like corruption, gender identity, these social issues, because it shattered so many different stereotypes that I see here in the U.S. The U.S. looks at the region and they’re like, “Oh my God, the men and the women have totally different rights, or they’re all religious, or they’re all ideological.” The data refutes most of those findings, at least from the eyes of young Arabs. I find it fascinating, and Americans will be shocked when they find out that young Arab women, young Arab women, think they have the same rights as young Arab men in the region. And especially in the Gulf. Especially in the Gulf.

In fact, one of the things that we finally found something that men and women agree on is both men and women, young, 18 to 24, think it’s very important for the woman to have a job as part of the family. It’s very important for the woman to work. Both men and women agree on the same thing. So, I find it really interesting how young Arabs see themselves and talk about themselves and their views and their goals, because it’s so in conflict with I think how many in the West see them, it’s something I think you should go through because it’s really eye opening. I look forward to reading that survey every year.

DUBOWITZ: Yeah, I know. I mean, listen, it’s fully consistent with my conversations with young Arab men and women in the Gulf over the years that I’ve been traveling there. And I think it’s critical for that reason to go there and interact with these people. And I’ve been particularly heartened to see all these Zoom meetings popping up between young Emiratis and young Israelis, men and women talking about the common interests and common values and how they see the future. I think that’s been really one of the most heartening and heartwarming aspects of this normalization deal. The question on Saudi Arabia leads me to a question related to the Palestinians. There was an interview that Prince

Bandar just gave, I think to *Al-Arabiya*. I’m sure you saw it. Which was very striking for me, at least kind of as an observer of the Gulf, but certainly not an expert like you, I was struck by his comments.

Now, I always thought Prince Bandar, obviously a former Saudi ambassador to the United States, former head of Saudi intelligence for many years, obviously very close to the Saudi Royal family and the key mover and shaker there, and somebody I thought would have pretty traditional views on the Palestinians, came out and blasted the Palestinian leadership in terms that you certainly would only hear from the most right-wing American Zionist organizations. He was caustic in essentially saying, “Listen, you’ve had every opportunity. You’ve blown every opportunity. We’ve been supporting you for years with money and political support and we never held you accountable. We should have held you accountable, but we never held you accountable. And now you have the audacity to be condemning the UAE and Bahrain for trying to normalize.” What do you make of Prince Bandar and his comments? Do you find them surprising?

AL OTAIBA: No, I’m honestly not surprised. I think we are all trying to trap ourselves in the old way of thinking. Right? Look, I’m a huge fan of the Arab Peace Initiative that came out in 2002. That was beautiful in its simplicity. Look, all 22 Arab countries will normalize with Israel when there is a Palestinian state that’s based on 1967 lines. Right? It’s great. It’s very simple. And I think it’s fair. Here’s the challenge. In 2002 until today, there has never been one task force. There’s never been a committee. There has never been any progress on this very nice and very fair Arab Peace Initiative. There’s been no progress in almost 20 years.

So, I would go back and say, okay, what should we do? Should we wait another 20 years and have no progress for 20 more years before we try something different? I truly believe that people are just tired of the old way of thinking, whether it’s young Arabs or whether it’s Arab leaderships, we realize that whatever we’re doing hasn’t worked. So, let’s try something else. Now, in our case, we stopped annexation. We can use suspend, we can use halt, we can use whatever term you want to use. The fact is annexation is now off the table because of what we provide. And so, I think it’s important to at least register that before we’re accused of betrayal or backstabbing. If we were doing this interview without our Abraham Accords, Mark, we would be talking about the consequences of annexation on the U.S. relationship and the region.

But we’re not, we’re talking about what it means to normalize. And the part of normalization that I’m most excited about that we really haven’t talked about yet is the people to people: the breaking the stereotypes, where a young Emiratis and young Israelis are actually going to get to know each other and understand each other and learn about their each other’s families and learn about each other’s histories. That wasn’t possible before. And that piece of normalization to me is I think the part we talk about the least, but it’s the most exciting. Well, we can talk about civil aviation agreements and double taxation agreements. That’s going to be done in a couple of weeks. But when a young Emirati travels or when a young Israeli comes over to spend the weekend in Dubai, that’s when we actually get to know each other. And that’s the part, I think, that unlocking is going to have a huge potential.

DUBOWITZ: Yeah. And listen, I totally agree with you. I mean, I’ve been on Zoom calls with my Emirati friends, my Israeli friends for the past month, and it’s just so much excitement, enthusiasm. And I have to give the UAE a lot of credit. I mean, I think you’ve taken some really important symbolic steps with respect to people to people normalization that I think has really broken through the stereotypes that Israelis and Americans have held for too long, that you’ve mentioned. I would just point out to some of our Jewish viewers that the only country in the world now that requires its hotels have kosher food is no, not Israel and not the United States, but it’s the UAE. I’ve found that both heartwarming and somewhat amusing, but I think it just speaks well to the importance, and I think you’ve understood this for a long

time, the importance of the symbolic gesture and how they can really break through old enmities and old assumptions. So, I think UAE deserves enormous credit for that. And I think MBZ deserves a lot of credit for being very farsighted.

AL OTAIBA: Here we are in 2020, and now Emirates Airlines has basically a kosher service on many of its flights for Jews. Emirates Airlines. Like, if you asked me a few years ago, “Will one of the world’s biggest airlines be mandated to serve kosher food on its flights?” I would be like, “Mark, you’re out of your mind. Why would they do that?” But here we are, Saudi Arabia is allowing overflight rights to El Al, Emirates is serving kosher food and Abu Dhabi hotels are serving kosher food. But that’s how you break stereotypes. That’s truly how you get people to understand and learn about each other. And to me, that is again, the most exciting part of the Abraham Accords.

DUBOWITZ: Oh, a hundred percent. Look, that would be a great note to end on. I know we’ve got a few more minutes of your time, and I really want take advantage of that. I want to shift a little bit to the geopolitics of Abraham Accords, particularly to an area that I spend a lot of time working on, which is obviously the threat from the Islamic Republic of Iran. A couple of questions there. Obviously, for the elections in the United States, we should hopefully by November, but maybe by January. Who knows how long it’ll take for conclusive results? But if there is a change in administration and if Joe Biden becomes president and moves in a different direction on Iran, relents on maximum pressure, goes back into the JCPOA and begins to engage with Islamic Republic in perhaps in a way that Barack Obama did. What kind of impact is that going to have from your perspective on UAE security? What does it mean for UAE/Israel cooperation? And what does it mean for general security and normalization in the region?

AL OTAIBA: So, what I would say to any incoming administration that is going to reassess its policy towards Iran is, let’s find out what works and what doesn’t. Let’s do a proper recalibration and assessment of the policies and see what works and what doesn’t. JCPOA had shortcomings. We all knew that. Even the Obama administration knew that. So, if we’re going to go back into JCPOA, it’s important to understand what those shortcomings were so we can address them.

I think it’s very funny because what the Trump administration is doing, or the policy on Iran, is very much similar to what the Obama policy on Iran is. Let’s put a lot of pressure in order for Iran to come to the table so we can negotiate a deal. In the Obama administration, we negotiated just on the nuclear side and we left it alone. With the Trump administration, they want to negotiate a much bigger package and we need to cover all the things that affect our part of the world: interference, missiles, proxies, interventions, arms shipments. These are things that are very dangerous to our part of the world, yet we never really put them as part of the formula in JCPOA. We were never at the table in the negotiations even though we are the countries at most risk. So, let’s address the shortcomings if we are going to sit down and negotiate a second deal. The second deal needs to address the shortcomings of the first deal. That would be what we would say to any administration coming in looking at Iran.

DUBOWITZ: Yeah. I wholeheartedly agree with you, I think as you know, but I would say there has been bipartisan concern over multiple administrations about the role that Dubai plays in sanctions busting and money laundering and other illicit financial activities. And I know that you’ve been hearing from U.S. officials for many years about that. What’s your response to those who say, “Listen, we’re serious about putting pressure on Iran. We’re serious about negotiating a comprehensive agreement that addresses the full range of Iran’s illicit activities, but when is Dubai going to get serious about stopping this illicit activity that flows through the Emirate?”

AL OTAIBA: I think it’s a fair question. And I probably talk to the Treasury as much as I talk to any other agency in Washington, but I can tell you that on political will, there’s 100% political will. If there’s violations of U.S. sanctions, we’re always quick to address them. We get information on a fairly regular basis about what company is doing what. So, I think

our cooperation and intel sharing on that front has gotten much, much better. But the Iranians are good at avoiding sanctions. They really are. They try to find loopholes and they try to find places where they can set up shop. And we are always trying to make – find ways to prevent that from happening. So, to the extent our relationship and intel sharing improves our efficiency and enforcing the sanctions always improves.

But just a note, when the sanctions were placed on Iran the first time around in 2015, I think, before JCPOA, trade between UAE and Iran went from 30 billion dirhams to about 5 billion dirhams. So, no, I would argue that the sanctions actually did work, and we enforced them pretty strongly. Otherwise we would not have seen a drop like that. There’s always more to be done. I concede that, but no one has lost more business with Iran than the UAE because of U.S. sanctions.

DUBOWITZ: Yeah, that’s probably right. I need to check the numbers, but I think you’re definitely in the top few. And now you’ve got a potentially new intel partner who I’m sure will be providing you with new information about sanctions busting all the time in the region. So that’s on Iran. I’d be remiss if we didn’t talk a little bit more about Qatar. Do you think Qatar would ever normalize with Israel? Do you see that happening even though Qatar today seems to be in the rejectionist camp, along with Iran and Turkey?

AL OTAIBA: I don’t know. It depends if Iran and Turkey will allow them to.

DUBOWITZ: So, you think that’s really the issue is that the Qatari’s are afraid of what the response will be from Erdoğan and Tehran if they move forward?

AL OTAIBA: I think you should ask the Qataris if the Iranians and Turks were willing to give them permission.

DUBOWITZ: Yeah. Qataris don’t really talk to me. So, I’ll have to find someone else.

AL OTAIBA: That makes two of us. Don’t worry.

DUBOWITZ: No, I think we’re definitely in the same camp there, but it is interesting because obviously they do have a relationship. They are talking to the Israelis, dealing with obviously Gaza and Hamas. So, unlike the Iranians, they actually do have a relationship. And unlike Erdoğan they tend to be at least publicly, less critical of Israel. Do you see things moving forward in a more positive direction with respect to the UAE and Qatar and what’s it going to take for that to happen?

AL OTAIBA: I don’t think so. What it would take for that to happen is some introspection, is some self-awareness, someone trying to understand why the rift occurred, why it actually occurred. And I don’t see that happening. I see the victim card being played. I see bad mouthing and mudslinging. I see lawsuits, I see pressure. And that’s not how you resolve a conflict. That’s how you, sort of, prolong the conflict. For the conflict to end someone needs to be serious about actually wanting to end the conflict. You can’t keep running to the United States and telling them to fix the problem for you. That’s not going to work. So, if you’re really serious about fixing it, look at what caused it, address those concerns, and then we’ll talk. But I have not seen that seriousness, honestly.

DUBOWITZ: It does actually open up the question of natural gas cooperation with Israel. I mean, I wonder whether there are opportunities for Israel, the UAE, Bahrain to cooperate via the Dolphin pipeline on Israeli natural gas exports to

replace Qatari natural gas. So, it seemingly opens up some really interesting opportunities under the Abraham Accords on energy cooperation.

AL OTAIBA: Our ministers of energy, I think about three days ago, put out a statement saying that they’re willing to consider strategic cooperation and alignment on a variety of energy projects. So again, on the technical side, whether it’s technology, AI, entrepreneurship and investment energy, I think everyone is going to find their appropriate counterpart and they’re going to be off to the races. I’m not worried about that at all.

DUBOWITZ: So, Yousef, I want to end on the human level, because I think you’ve been absolutely right to emphasize that. And I think your message is right. The politicians will get together. The bureaucrats will get together. They’ll negotiate MOU’s, there’ll be technical understandings. And it seems that that’s where it really moving forward in an impressive direction. But I was really struck today by a photo that I saw, which as an American Jew was really impactful for me, I have to say. And that was, and I think that you’re probably aware of what I’m going to say, is there was a photo taken in Berlin at the Holocaust memorial of your foreign minister, the Israeli foreign minister, and the German foreign minister standing there at the Holocaust memorial, by the way all wearing their masks, so definitely want to emphasize that, but that is just from a symbolism perspective, from a human perspective, that really struck me in a profound way. I think I read somewhere, I don’t know if it’s true, but it’s the most senior Arab leader ever to visit a Holocaust memorial or monument, and that this idea to go to Berlin for the meeting and to visit the Holocaust Memorial was actually MBZ’s idea.

AL OTAIBA: It was indeed. We discussed it when he was here for the signing. So, it was definitely his idea. He orchestrated it. It was actually supposed to occur about two weeks ago. Someone from the German foreign minister’s office contracted COVID. And so, the minister had to go into isolation for two weeks, so it got postponed to today. So, this was supposed to happen even earlier than today, but it was definitely his idea, but I’d just like to point out something. I know everything gets framed under the normalization of the Abraham Accords. No, Sheikh Abdullah visited the Holocaust museum here twice. I went with him twice, I think it was like 15 years ago, but interfaith and tolerance and respect and inclusion is something that we’ve championed for a long time.

Pope Francis came to visit us in February of ‘19. Almost two years ago. The Abrahamic House was awarded about a year and a half ago. So, all these things were going on before the Abraham Accords. I think the Abraham Accords now provide a different context, a more geopolitical context of U.S., UAE and Israel working together. But we always, we always believed in tolerance and inclusion. We’ve always believed in respect. We’ve always believed that religion is a personal, private, issue and people should get together and respect each other based on their own views. Religion should not be a prominent, visible role in government. That’s not how we operate.

And I think it was really nice that Sheikh Abdullah wanted, for the first time he meets his Israeli counterpart, one to be on neutral territory, and he decided Berlin is the place where he wanted that to happen. But then he said, “We should go and visit the memorial together and make sure everyone sees that, because it reflects our values, it reflects who we are. Politics and policy aside, this is what we believe in.” And I’m glad it happened and I’m glad people got to see it. I understand there’s always going to be cynicism and people are going to be second guessing why this happened, but I’m telling you it happened because that’s who we are.

DUBOWITZ: Yeah. And, listen, it helps when it really reflects your values and it’s genuine and not just political symbolism, but it also stands in obviously marked contrast to the Holocaust denial and incitement of genocide coming out of Tehran. It stands in more contrast to, what Recep Erdoğan has done to the Republic of Turkey, which obviously

used to be not only a pro-Israel country, but a country where Jews felt comfortable, and really was a country that it's celebrated, was ecumenical and celebrated people of all faiths, and Erdoğan is now turning Turkey, unfortunately, into something very, very different. And even Qatar which obviously Israelis have visited Qatar, Jews have been in Qatar, but Qatar also hosts Hamas and provides significant support to a terrorist organization that also incites the genocide and denies the Holocaust.

So, when you're doing something that reflects your values, that's genuine, and that really fundamentally underscores the importance of interfaith dialogue and your adversaries are doing the opposite, you know that this is a very different Middle East. That you are really helping to shape and transform.

AL OTAIBA: I just want again highlight that we were doing all these things before the Abraham Accords, and we're going to continue doing them after the Abraham Accords. I think we're breaking ground on the Abraham House in a month or so. And it's going to be done in two years. That's going to be the first time, I'm aware, that an Arab government paid for and funded and built a mosque, synagogue, and a church. I can't think of another example of that has happened in recent history.

DUBOWITZ: No, it's remarkable. And listen, what we talked about in Saudi Arabia as well. I think a hat tip to the Saudis too, because they are start starting to change the views of their people and beginning to prepare their people for political normalization with Israel, but they're doing it again, I think taking a page from your playbook, or --it sounds too cynical-- repeating something that has been so successful for you, transforming your people, and their values, and their perceptions, and the education system. They're starting to do the same thing. And I think that obviously portends well for potential normalization from Saudi Arabia in the future.

Yousef, let me thank you. It's a delight obviously to always talk to you, and it's obviously a delight to talk to you about something that even though it involves geopolitics and there's a lot to be concerned about and cynical about in 2020, you've helped to spearhead really a transformative change that I think gives a lot of hope to children and grandchildren of people who for too long have thought about the Middle East as a place that would only bring, “blood and sand” as somebody quite, I think, wrongly characterized it. So, thank you for your time. Thank you for all you've done. And it's been a real pleasure.

AL OTAIBA: Thank you very much for having me Mark. As always good to talk to you. I hope your viewers enjoy the session, but I'm just going to finish off where I started, which is I'm really optimistic about the forces that the Abraham Accords will unleash. Forces for good, momentum, positivity, changing the mindset. People are just tired of the old way of thinking. People are tired of conflict. People are tired of ideology. Ideology has not delivered. Ideology has not delivered jobs. Ideology has not delivered peace. We are trying to challenge people to think differently. And I think the Abraham Accords reflects that in a way that people are really excited about. I think people are genuinely excited about what this means for our part of the world. And I know it's an experiment that I believe will succeed. Thanks again for having me.

DUBOWITZ: All right. Thanks Yousef. God bless.

AL OTAIBA: Thanks, Mark.