**Abstract:** How can peace initiatives reinforce authoritarian practices? Peace, in the name of political and cultural development, can function to uphold, facilitate, and improve upon authoritarian practices under certain conditions. I use the recent steps towards normalization and, in some instances, peace agreements between Israel and a number of Arab states to make this argument. These initiatives have facilitated authoritarian practices by necessitating the increase of state repression, fraying social ties, and expanding regime capacity through the acquisition of repressive technologies. I examine this dynamic across four GCC states with varying authoritarian practices and ties to Israel: UAE, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar. Using ethnographic analysis and interviews, this paper contributes to our understanding of authoritarian power and how it functions, transnationally and at varying levels within and outside state authority.

**Introduction**

How can peace initiatives reinforce authoritarian practices? Peace initiatives are seen as beneficial, understandably, given the alternative of continued conflict and the human cost of war. However, peace may have repressive impacts under certain conditions – especially when implemented in authoritarian contexts.

Recent research has called for a re-evaluation of how we study authoritarianism, focusing not on the state as the unit of analysis, but rather on a set of “practices” which are often transregionally facilitated.[[1]](#footnote-2) Glasius (2018) defines authoritarian practices as a “pattern of actions” which “sabotage accountability to people…over whom a political actor exerts control.”[[2]](#footnote-3) These practices include pre-emptive actions against the emergence of dissent, technocratizing political issues, and outright repression of opposition. In this paper, I build on this crucial work by applying this framework to another context. I argue that peace can also function to facilitate and increase authoritarian practices under certain conditions. I use the recent steps towards normalization and, in some instances, signing of peace agreements between Israel and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states to make this argument.

Peace initiatives are defined here as the development of relations between two parties in conflict, which include normalization, at various levels, as well as official peace agreements. Israeli officials define normalization as any cultural, trade, and military ties, overt or covert.[[3]](#footnote-4) In this paper I consider normalization a form of peace initiative, because the development of ties between two countries on opposing sides of a conflict increases linkages, and makes conflict less likely.[[4]](#footnote-5) Thus even if the stated purpose of normalization is not an eventual peace agreement, it still serves the purpose of facilitating peace. Finally, and most importantly, recent research highlights how monarchies utilize informal agreements more than formal ones, and how these arrangements becoming increasingly formalized over time.[[5]](#footnote-6) Thus, including the full range of peace agreements and adjacent arrangements is suitable for this project given the cases in question.

I argue that peace initiatives in illiberal contexts facilitate authoritarian practices by necessitating the increase of state repression, fraying social ties, and expanding regime capacity. They increase repression because such initiatives enflame public opinion, generating tensions between state and society. In this case, Arab publics are largely pro-Palestinian.[[6]](#footnote-7) Thus, when a country normalizes with Israel, this provokes outcry from citizens, inevitably leading to crackdown on often the most vocal segments of civil society.[[7]](#footnote-8) To ensure no criticism, regimes also fray social ties and erode trust, as they encourage citizens to report on each other and outsource repression to non-state entities. Lastly, peace between Israel and the GCC states facilitates the acquisition of repressive technologies.[[8]](#footnote-9) Security linkages between militaries, intelligence, and/or private sector surveillance corporations are a significant factor in authoritarian learning.[[9]](#footnote-10)

Finally, authoritarian practices emerge not only through arms of the state.[[10]](#footnote-11) In the cases discussed here, other actors also develop and reinforce these. These actors include familial/tribal networks, government-affiliated/organized non-governmental organizations (GONGOs), and private corporations. The broad network of actors involved makes authoritarian practices more difficult to oppose.

In this paper, I examine this dynamic across GCC states with varying authoritarian practices (dependent variable) and ties to Israel (independent variable): UAE, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar. These countries represent a range of ties with Israel, from limited normalization on the part of Qatar, less public but significant forms of normalization on the part of Saudi Arabia, and official peace agreements with Israel on the part of Bahrain and the UAE.[[11]](#footnote-12) Furthermore, these countries represent the ideological divide in the region (on questions of democracy and foreign policy), as well as internal conditions and space for civil society.[[12]](#footnote-13) Thus, including evidence from all four helps to show how such peace promotes authoritarian practices, to varying degrees, in spite of the foreign policy positions or internal dynamics of any given state.

**Reinforcing and Promoting Authoritarianism**

Research on authoritarianism and its sources shows how regimes today are engaged in “innovations,” combining repression, cooptation, and legitimation strategies in new ways. These are gained through linkages and learning between authoritarian states and vary in intentionality.[[13]](#footnote-14) Some exist between states actively promoting authoritarianism, while others merely increase repressive capacity as a side effect of interest alignment between two undemocratic countries.[[14]](#footnote-15) Much of this research specifically focuses on linkages between global south countries on one hand, and Russia and China on the other.[[15]](#footnote-16)

However, another vein of research notes that autocratic innovations often also implicate democratic states. Morgenbesser (2020) highlights how authoritarian strategies may have democratic precedents, designed to suppress civil society and mobilization while mimicking “horizontal and vertical accountability.”[[16]](#footnote-17) He notes that this “undignified track record is indicative of how many techniques do not so easily discriminate between autocratic and democratic regimes.”[[17]](#footnote-18) Moreover, democracies have been implicated in actively reinforcing authoritarianism in certain cases.[[18]](#footnote-19) In this paper, I argue that Israel, defined as a democracy by measures in the political science literature, is one such (often-missed) case.[[19]](#footnote-20)

Some researchers argue, however, that these regime-specific approaches obfuscate modern manifestations of authoritarian power and its sources. Glasius argues that rather than focus on authoritarian regimes, one should focus on authoritarian *practices*. Such a focus helps to differentiate between illiberal practices, which may also emerge in democratic contexts, from practices which actively sabotage accountability by means of “secrecy, disinformation, and disabling voice.”[[20]](#footnote-21)

Building off this work, Jenns & Schuetze (2020) make a crucial intervention. They define authoritarian practices as “preventing (possibilities for) dissent, rendering deeply political questions into matters of seemingly only technical concern, and repressing oppositional activism.”[[21]](#footnote-22) They introduce this in the context of what they call the “transregional authoritarian logistics space” (TALS) to highlight the increasing “authoritarian connections” between places outside the confines of states/geographic boundaries.[[22]](#footnote-23) This approach helps combine the focus on the local and the extraterritorial in one analysis so researchers do not miss how authoritarianism manifests itself outside the state or regime actors.

**Peace Initiatives and their Impacts**

One motivation which has been missed in the literature is peace between states, in the name of political and cultural development. A cessation of armed conflict has wide-ranging impacts: avoiding the death and destruction that comes from violence, mitigating social exclusion,[[23]](#footnote-24) facilitating political participation,[[24]](#footnote-25) etc. Although negotiated peace agreements are not how the majority of conflicts end, an official peace agreement is the normative goal of much of the research on this subject.[[25]](#footnote-26)

However, as the frequency of peace settlements has declined, researchers have offered critiques of the notion of liberal peace. These have focused on how such internationally-mediated settlements may deny local agency,[[26]](#footnote-27) allow structural violence and inequality to continue,[[27]](#footnote-28) and ignore the increased likelihood of “illiberal peace,” i.e. authoritarian conflict management, in the vast majority of conflicts.[[28]](#footnote-29) The increased reliance on state coercion to resolve conflict, which illiberal peace entails, is concurrent with the increased influence of authoritarian powers on the international system. Importantly, as Lewis et al note, while instances of “peace” which sustain illiberal institutions or maintain structural violence have been mentioned in the literature, there has been little done to “unpack” this phenomenon.[[29]](#footnote-30)

This paper argues that cessation of conflict does not need to be via violent means to sustain authoritarian practices. Some case-specific literature has alluded to this. For instance, research on the case of Jordan has pointed out how developments in the peace process with Israel were directly linked to “retreats” in political freedoms in the liberalization process. The peace agreement led to the weakening of the Jordanian parliament, increase in electoral fraud, decline in trust in the political process, the targeting of civil society actors, and even the side-lining of critical elites.[[30]](#footnote-31) Bouillon (2001) corroborates this idea, noting that the Jordanian king came to the conclusion “peace and democracy would not go together,” and acted accordingly.[[31]](#footnote-32) Similar crackdowns were noted in the case of Egypt following the October/Yom Kippur War and the beginning of the peace negotiations between Egypt and Israel. To ensure the peace process moved forward smoothly, in spite of societal opposition, the Egyptian regime rounded up critics, as well as pushed a large number of Palestinians out of the country.[[32]](#footnote-33) These examples show how peace settlements need not be violently imposed to still interact with, and exacerbate, authoritarian practices.

**Argument**

I argue that peace initiatives promote authoritarian practices under certain conditions. Similar in manner to the way authoritarian practices are facilitated and legitimized under the guise of economic development, Arab regimes have pursued normalization with Israel under the guise of political and cultural development.[[33]](#footnote-34) For instance, the UAE coaches peace initiatives in the language of increasing tolerance and advancing cultural development. Other justifications included strengthening security, and developing an effective strategy to launch “counterjihad” against the backwardness represented by Islamist parties.[[34]](#footnote-35)

But, such peace initiatives are predicated on preventing and repressing opposition, as well as disinformation. Moreover, repression of citizens in these countries has been outsourced to various actors, so that increased authoritarianism is propagated not just by official arms of the state.

Peace initiatives with Israel facilitate increased authoritarian practices via three distinct mechanisms. First, these agreements **increase repression** by necessitating that regimes censor information and crack down on activists, in the name of upholding their obligations under the peace agreement. Citizens who express criticisms find themselves facing criminal prosecution, arrest, or even revocation of citizenship.

Secondly, such peace initiatives facilitate the **fraying of social ties**. As a way of policing dissent, the state encourages citizens to report on one another, and actively erodes social trust. Citizens self-censor in order to avoid trouble. States also outsource repression, directly or indirectly, to GONGOs, universities, and other sites of mobilization, as well as family groups and tribes. This further weakens social ties in the few spaces citizens have.

Thirdly, such illiberal peace helps to develop authoritarian practices through the **acquisition** **of repressive technologies**. This happens between states, through military-to-military coordination and intelligence sharing, but also via corporations. Both pathways occur because Israel is a major source of authoritarian expertise. Israel’s occupation of the Palestinian territories has provided it with decades of experience in policing, surveilling, and criminalizing dissent.[[35]](#footnote-36)

Israel exports this expertise via their defense industry, a major contributor to the economy with ties to the Israeli government. Moreover, Israel consistently ranks among the top countries for military exports (#8 in the latest SIPRI report). In comparison, Saudi Arabia, UAE, and Qatar are ranked #1, #8, and #10 respectively, as main importers of military technology.[[36]](#footnote-37) Peace with Israel thus allows Arab states to increase their access to authoritarian technologies – as well as project power abroad.

**Methodology**

I use qualitative data to illustrate the three mechanisms described above. This data was collected over two years of fieldwork (2018 – 2020), in which I conducted political ethnography and observed civil society organizations, before and after advancements in normalization/official peace agreements. These groups included those focused on human rights, democratic accountability, and pro-Palestine advocacy. I chose to focus on the impacts of the relationship between peace initiatives on one hand and proliferation of authoritarian practices on the other through the lens of civil society groups. I did so to show how peace initiatives impact the lived experiences of citizens in these places.

Research entailed attending group meetings and events, as well as building relationships with key stakeholders.[[37]](#footnote-38) Events occurred approximately once a month, though following the covid-19 pandemic a proliferation of online seminars/panels increased their frequency. Building relationships with group members allowed me to supplement my fieldwork with 13 semi-structured interviews with activists and leaders of such organizations, which resulted in approximately 30 additional hours of direct exposure. Moreover, I followed “case study logic” to determine who was interviewed, viewing each interview as its own case. This method “proceeds sequentially,” recognizing that “each case provides an increasingly accurate understanding of the question.”[[38]](#footnote-39) Unlike sampling logic (more common to quantitative methods) which focuses on generalizability, case study logic is more “effective when asking how or why questions about processes unknown before the start of the study.”[[39]](#footnote-40) Saturation, rather than scope of description or sheer number of datapoints, is therefore key.

The main objective of my ethnographic analysis is to outline the causal mechanisms at work.[[40]](#footnote-41) Surveys or interviews do not suffice in this regard, given the disjuncture that often exists between stated attitudes and subsequent behavior, especially in authoritarian contexts.[[41]](#footnote-42) Thus pairing ethnography with other methods helps to navigate the challenges that come with such an environment, where there is often an incentive to obfuscate or hide information, since ethnography builds trust over time.[[42]](#footnote-43) This approach is particularly well-suited to the study of contentious politics and dissent, because it “uncovers hidden processes” and “gives voice to unheard stories.”[[43]](#footnote-44) These “ethnography plus” methods, as Tarrow (2021) refers to them,[[44]](#footnote-45) allow the subjects of the study to speak for themselves, giving the researcher’s “outsider” perspective more resonance with how “insiders” interpret and explain their own conditions.[[45]](#footnote-46) Overall, this mechanism-based approach helps generate new theoretical insights, answering the important “how” questions which are the focus of this study, in addition to the “why” questions so common to political science that “emphasize variation and outcome.”

In the next section, I present the evidence from the cases across three categories, from less significant normalization to official peace agreement. A summary of this evidence is in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Summary of Evidence

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  |  | **Repression** | **Social ties** | **Repressive Technologies** |
| *Cultural and diplomatic normalization* | **Qatar** | Shuttering of Qatar Committee (1988)  Investigations into QAYON members  Delayed state paperwork | Gender harassment  University silencing students + students reporting on each other  Activists incorporated into ministries  Online harassment  GONGOs no longer space for events | COGAT coordination |
| *Security and military normalization* | **Saudi Arabia** | Disappearances of Palestinians in Riyadh  GONGOs instead of civil society  No official Saudi involvement in regional groups | Exile and estrangement  Self-censorship and citizen reporting of illicit activity  Divorces | NSO Group spyware  Intelligence sharing  Military-to-military coordination  Surveillance Operator (Monarchy/Kingdom) |
| *Official peace agreement* | **Bahrain** | NGO restrictions via registration requirements  Civil Service Bureau bylaw  Repressing protests | Self-censorship | NSO Group spyware  Surveillance Operator (Pearl) |
| **UAE** | Committee for the Resistance of Normalization (shut down 2013)  The UAE 94 trial  Student groups shut down | Intolerance discourse  Citizen reporting  Exile and estrangement | NSO Group spyware + Dark Matter + AGT International  Military-to-military  Surveillance Operator (Falcon)  Intelligence-sharing |

***Diplomatic and Cultural Normalization***

*Qatar*

Qatar was among the first to “spearhead” Arab normalization following the 1993 Oslo Accords. The first to open an Israel trade office in the Gulf, Qatar also hosted Israeli heads of state even under politically sensitive circumstances.[[46]](#footnote-47) According to Israeli officials, Qatar was the only Arab country without official ties which maintained a relationship with Israel during the 2nd intifada.[[47]](#footnote-48)

At the same time, pro-Palestine solidarity groups in Qatar were tolerated. Most pro-Palestine groups focused on humanitarian issues, though some more directly challenged regime policy. These included the “Qatar National Committee to Support the Palestinian Intifada” which began in 1988 in response to the first intifada, and the “Qatar Society for Supporting Palestinian Rights” which began in response to the second.[[48]](#footnote-49) Moreover, groups such as “Youth for Jerusalem” (شباب لأجل القدس) are staples at Qatar University.[[49]](#footnote-50) Uncharacteristically, protests in support of the 2nd intifada were even permitted.[[50]](#footnote-51)

This societal support is corroborated by polling as well. Qataris were recently polled on whether they agree with that Palestine was a “cause for all Arabs, and not just Palestinians alone.” They were also asked about diplomatic recognition of Israel. In that survey, 88% of Qataris believed that the Palestinian cause was a “cause for all Arabs,” and only 3% approved of diplomatic recognition.[[51]](#footnote-52)

With every step towards normalization, however, the space for pro-Palestinian organizing has become more limited. After the signing of the Oslo Accords, Qatar pursued normalization and concurrently, the Committee to Support the Palestinian Intifada was shut down. Their bank account was closed and funds transferred to the Ministry of Endowments and Islamic Affairs without prior warning or consent.[[52]](#footnote-53) Primary documents show correspondence between the committee and the Emir’s office from as early as 1988, in which the state requests their incorporation into the official taskforce on Palestine. However, while pressure and attempts to co-opt the group were present, it was normalization after Oslo in particular that got them shut down for good.

This dynamic can be seen more recently as well. Qatar’s winning bid to host the FIFA World Cup in 2022 was intended to be a form of legitimation, to establish Qatar on the world stage. To demonstrate the seriousness of Qatar’s commitment to hosting such an event, the government went on record to welcome Israeli athletes.[[53]](#footnote-54) Forms of normalization have been increasing since, especially on cultural and diplomatic fronts. The oft-repeated justification for this from Qatari decision-makers is that it is necessary for Qatar to play a unique role as mediator of regional conflicts, including on Palestine.[[54]](#footnote-55) As a result, we see evidence of the three main mechanisms described above.

Beginning with the **acquisition of repressive technology**: Qatar’s open ties with Israel’s foes, including Hamas and Iran, means that Israeli companies are forbidden from selling their services to the Qatari state directly.[[55]](#footnote-56) Nevertheless, Qatar’s mediator role in Gaza has garnered it American and Israeli support.[[56]](#footnote-57) There are exchanges between Israel and Qatar, including increased military coordination, which has drawn the ire of Qatari civil society. Examples include joint military exercises, as well as coordination with the Israeli military’s “Coordinator of Government Activity in the Territories,” the institution responsible for “managing” the Gaza strip. Some prominent pro-Israel voices within the US even dubbed Qatar “the Israel of the Gulf,” and Israeli officials recognized that Qatar was responsible for avoiding Israel another war.[[57]](#footnote-58)

Although the material exchange of repressive technologies is less relevant to this case than the other cases in the region, we still see the two other mechanisms abovementioned. For instance, in exchange for background support for Qatar in American foreign policy circles, Israel pressured Qatar into ceding ground on a number of issues: imposing limitations on media freedom by blocking documentaries damaging to Israel, expelling Hamas members from Doha, and cracking down on activism.[[58]](#footnote-59)

The trajectory of QAYON, “Qatari Youth Against Normalization,” illustrates these dynamics most clearly. This group began in the 2011/2012 academic year specifically to combat normalization. According to their founding members, their objectives were to educate the public and make demands of the government. QAYON had no official permission to organize, i.e. no government license.[[59]](#footnote-60) However, while activists were not encouraged to engage in their activities, neither did the government crackdown.

QAYON was successful in organizing Israeli Apartheid Week annually, and coordinating with activists across the region. They worked to create a regional pro-Palestine network, BDS Gulf, and organizing multiple events to generate shared strategies. Finally, they had an impact on overall Qatari civil society, by mobilizing and politicizing other groups. One example is the group *Talee’a,* which startedin 2018, that directly challenged the state’s narrative of Qatari identity, as well as commented on political issues related to the constitution.[[60]](#footnote-61)

Prior to 2017, QAYON faced the most pressure when they attempted to organize with groups outside of Qatar, because the government feared diplomatic rifts with its neighbors. But internally, QAYON was given space, and sometimes even supported by government-affiliated groups.[[61]](#footnote-62) Officials would even express support for their anti-normalization stance.[[62]](#footnote-63) However, as the drive for cultural and political development increased, QAYON members say there has been a marked shift in the tolerance of the state. The government brought prominent Zionist voices to the country for public relations tours, and increased the pace of Israeli participation in official events. At the same time, **repression** of activists accelerated.

Members who take on outward leadership roles have been approached individually by government officials. The fact that QAYON made political demands, and did not confine themselves to “raising awareness” as other groups have often done, made them a target.[[63]](#footnote-64) Members have been questioned and told that their pro-Palestinian activities should end.[[64]](#footnote-65) Official paperwork related to aspects of daily life – such as employment and travel – have also been withheld from targeted members.[[65]](#footnote-66)

Women in particular have faced social pressures, with people “informing” on their activities to their families. Activists reported that they feared gender-based harassment for their opposition to state policy. This tactic is used by state officials to outsource repression to the family unit, by casting doubt on the engagements of female activists and insinuating illicit activity. Families then intervene to, at a minimum, keep the activist from continuing her work, and at worst, by using coercion.[[66]](#footnote-67)

Moreover, Qatar University began forbidding student groups from sponsoring outside events, and have not approved the creation of any Palestine-related groups that might engage in boycott campaigns.[[67]](#footnote-68) QAYON members report that they had been “blacklisted” in their university, and that there have been instances of other students reporting on their activities.[[68]](#footnote-69) An attempt to hold the university accountable for their partnership with companies considered complicit in Israeli occupation ended with disciplinary action against the students who led the campaign.[[69]](#footnote-70) Similar dynamics have played out with GONGOs in Qatar, such as Katara, which had previously provided space to QAYON for their activities.[[70]](#footnote-71)

Furthermore, activists say Twitter harassment has markedly increased. It became clear to many members that they faced both online and off-line surveillance.[[71]](#footnote-72) As one member put it, this “drove discussion underground,” as people retreated to private spaces and no longer felt comfortable addressing their peers.[[72]](#footnote-73) Clearly not only has direct state repression taken its toll, but the **fraying of social ties** has had an impact on the scope of political organizing.

Today, QAYON continues to fight to exist. They have launched a number of online campaigns to document instances of confrontation they have had with the Qatari state over normalization. Nevertheless, many members have had to take a “back seat” as a result of state pressure, and the limited space for organizing is a real concern.[[73]](#footnote-74) All their activities have moved online, given their blacklisting at previously public spaces. Student members within the university say that they have been relegated to engaging in charity events that are “repetitive and ineffective.”[[74]](#footnote-75)

On the regional front, QAYON has recently joined in the efforts of the “Gulf Coalition against Normalization,” a pan-Gulf organization formed after the peace agreements of the UAE and Bahrain. Members of QAYON who have taken part in the Coalition’s seminars have also faced online backlash.[[75]](#footnote-76) Activists believe this harassment is state-led, and is intended to dampen support for their activities.

All in all, the Qatari case demonstrates that intensification in illiberal peace initiatives, even via normalization, leads to an increase in authoritarian practices. Normalization in this case never reached the level of official recognition of Israel, but nevertheless intensified.[[76]](#footnote-77) This led to tension between the state and its citizens, direct repression and fraying of social ties, and a narrowing of the space for acceptable dissent.

***Military and Security Normalization***

*Saudi Arabia*

Saudi Arabia has long had a very limited space for dissent. The issue of Palestine has been one of the few topic areas in which Saudi citizens can mobilize, with the state’s acquiescence. Saudis have a history of protest in support of the Palestinian cause, beginning as early as the 1920s.[[77]](#footnote-78) This continued throughout the 1930’s, in support of the Arab revolt in Palestine and in opposition to the partition of the country. The Palestinian cause also spurred the creation of Saudi “popular action committees,” in order to gather financial support from within the kingdom.[[78]](#footnote-79) The current king, Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud, personally oversaw the fundraising committee for Palestine within the Saudi government during his time as emir.[[79]](#footnote-80)

Evidence of pro-Palestinian sentiment among Saudi citizens is also present more recently. Saudis broke taboos for the sake of the Palestinian cause, going so far as to stage a protest in solidarity with Gaza during the Israeli attack of 2008.[[80]](#footnote-81) After the Arab Spring, there was a proliferation of organizations, many with a pro-Palestine outlook, such as *Multaqa Altawaasul* (Communication Forum). Saudi activists were additionally the main organizing force, and the largest showing, in the pan-Gulf “Youth Renaissance Forum,” which brought together activists to discuss possible democratic reforms in their region. The Palestinian cause was featured heavily in their discussions.

Moreover, polling provides further evidence of the space for pro-Palestinian sentiment in Saudi Arabia. Results of the Arab Opinion Index (2019-2020) show how, when asked whether they agreed with the sentiment that “the Palestinian cause is a cause for all Arabs, and not just Palestinians alone,” a vast majority of Saudis - 89% of respondents - agreed. Similarly, when asked about whether they supported their government officially recognizing the state of Israel, only 6% of Saudis agreed.[[81]](#footnote-82) Pro-Palestinian sentiment in Saudi Arabia has been consistent since the beginning of polling efforts in 2011, and there is a high level of public disagreement with normalization.[[82]](#footnote-83)

Palestine became less of a priority to the Saudi regime not because society lost interest, but because of greater policy alignment with the US.[[83]](#footnote-84) Alongside that came “under-the-table” normalization with Israel, as the Saudi government became eager to demonstrate it was not supportive of extremism - particularly after 9/11.[[84]](#footnote-85) Not only were charity groups more tightly controlled, but many youth organizers who mobilized around Palestine were silenced.[[85]](#footnote-86)

This dynamic accelerated after Mohammad Bin Salman (MBS) became Crown Prince. Following his consolidation of power, civil society organizers of all political persuasions have been targeted, and arrested, exiled, or imprisoned.[[86]](#footnote-87) MBS and his government believe that a “benevolent autocracy” is necessary to bring social liberalism to Saudi Arabia, and the country into the modern era.[[87]](#footnote-88) Individuals close to the regime have compared MBS to Bismarck: a leader who had to make difficult but necessary decisions, including extreme repression to improve Saudi Arabia’s stagnant culture[[88]](#footnote-89) and defend it from forces of political Islam - an enemy of Saudi’s new leadership and Israel alike.[[89]](#footnote-90)

Thus, one aspect of this political and cultural advancement was an increased alignment with Israel. The two countries had already established some degree of military and intelligence coordination, as described above, but this only accelerated. MBS signaled his willingness to compromise on key issues related to the Arab-Israeli conflict,[[90]](#footnote-91) and collaborate with Israel on development projects such as the new “smart city” on the Red Sea.[[91]](#footnote-92) While these linkages fall short of an actual peace agreement, they are often couched in terms of improving “regional stability” and facilitating “peace.”[[92]](#footnote-93)

Increased ties with Israel facilitated **increased repression** in the Saudi case– not just general crackdown on actors with mobilizing capacity, but on individuals and organizations specifically speaking out on Palestine. Since the increased alignment under MBS, activists have heard rumors that repression of the Palestinian community in Saudi Arabia has taken place, with many “disappearing” without a trace.[[93]](#footnote-94) A group of Palestinian expats in Saudi Arabia were rounded up in February 2019, put in political prisons, tortured, and subjected to secret trials with accusations of terrorism.[[94]](#footnote-95) Surveillance of civil society, and the proliferation of GONGOs, has also increased. Organizing officially as a civil society group has always been arduous, but today the only opportunity for those interested in engaging on social issues is work through GONGOs. Political issues, on the other hand, are now firmly out of the question.[[95]](#footnote-96)

With criminalization of dissent, particularly in 2017-2018, the Saudi online sphere has also been severely impacted.[[96]](#footnote-97) One study shows that most discourse on Twitter for instance is indeed driven by a few accounts, while those who disagree no longer engaging online.[[97]](#footnote-98) The pro-Palestinian Saudi group – Saudi Against Normalization – has been targeted specifically. This group relied heavily on online spaces to advocate for their claims. They had enough traction with wider society to generate a petition with thousands of names from across the GCC, against Anwar Eshgi – a Saudi general – and his visit to Israel.[[98]](#footnote-99) Many prominent intellectuals worked with the group and expressed their support of its activities.[[99]](#footnote-100) However, following shifts in the Israeli-Saudi relationship under MBS, this group no longer functions. Their account has been hacked, and many of its key members have become exiles. Of the many who were arrested in the 2017-2018 crackdown, those released had to sign pledges to not engage in activism, and have since taken positions in the private sector or within the state’s own institutions.[[100]](#footnote-101)

We also see evidence of **fraying social ties** as the relationship between Israel and Saudi Arabia improves. Given that the Saudi regime pursues normalization with Israel under the banner of political and cultural development, those who insist in their opposition to this development are seen as culturally backward.[[101]](#footnote-102) There is widening separation in public discourse, between supporters of state policy and individuals deemed backwards for their support of Palestine, their denouncement of US policy, and other forms of dissent.[[102]](#footnote-103) Finally, many who were once active in media and/or civil society have withdrawn from their social circles, further eroding ties between fellow organizers who once made up a regular part of each other’s social interaction. People have also ended marriages/relationships, and had to denounce family members.[[103]](#footnote-104)

These dynamics go hand in hand with the **acquisition of repressive technologies**. Military-to-military coordination between Israel and a number of Gulf states, including Saudi Arabia, has been corroborated by multiple sources.[[104]](#footnote-105) The Saudis have bought drones and gained access to satellites to monitor Iran. They also use Israeli private corporations as subcontractors, even on projects related to national security.[[105]](#footnote-106) Finally, the Saudis have purchased surveillance tools as well as the know-how of invasive apps and hacking technology, in order to target dissidents.[[106]](#footnote-107)

One clear example of this is the use of spyware. This effort was led by Saud Al-Qahtani, advisor to MBS, and head of the Saudi Federation of Cyber Security, Programming, and Drones. Al-Qahtani was long interested in hacking software, having reached out to a variety of organizations in pursuit of this goal.[[107]](#footnote-108) When the repression campaign began in 2017, the Saudi government purchased surveillance software from Israeli “cyber warfare” vendor NSO Group.[[108]](#footnote-109) One such software, Pegasus, allowed them to spy on dissidents living abroad and attempt to return them to Saudi soil under false pretenses. Al-Qahtani’s team also purchased tools from a second Israeli company called Q Cyber Technologies. These purchases were approved by the Israeli government, and the tools were used in widely publicized cases such as the killing of journalist Jamal Khashoggi.[[109]](#footnote-110)

Moreover, in their attempt to control opposition at home and abroad, the GCC states ramped up their official intelligence sharing with the Israeli government. Intelligence chief Ahmed Al-Assiri visited Israel repeatedly to discuss security coordination.[[110]](#footnote-111) Despite the international backlash following Khashoggi’s assassination, Israel and Saudi Arabia have continued to expand their intelligence sharing to combat political enemies in the region.[[111]](#footnote-112)

Thus, using Israeli technology and support, Saudi Arabia has been able to target activists, control the internet landscape, and repress the nascent civil society that once existed.[[112]](#footnote-113) The Citizen Lab reports that there are no less than 12 Israeli surveillance operators targeting the Middle East, with a number of specialized operators for Saudi Arabia.[[113]](#footnote-114) Israel has reportedly encouraged NSO Group to sell technology to Saudi Arabia, UAE, and Bahrain, but not to Qatar.[[114]](#footnote-115) This corroborates the idea that Saudi Arabia is seen as an ally, precisely because these sales have not been blocked but instead facilitated. Coupled with recent advancements in zero-click hacking by Israeli companies, Saudi Arabia’s acquisition of such technologies is set to continue.[[115]](#footnote-116)

Today, Saudi Arabia has officially stated it still backs the Arab Peace Initiative (an agreement between the Arab League countries in support of the two-state solution given certain provisions), and does not intend to pursue changes to its relationship with Israel prior to advancements on the API. Nevertheless, official sources were quick to make clear that Saudi citizens should not criticize the “sovereign” decisions of other countries that normalize, and notable officials expressed their enthusiasm for such steps.[[116]](#footnote-117) A number of Saudi elites tied to the state also publicly stated their support for the UAE’s peace agreement with Israel and used similar slogans to Emirati social media influencers online. Experts on Gulf affairs presume that under-the-table normalization between Saudi and Israel will continue, and the UAE will serve as a conduit for future coordination without taking unnecessary public steps for the time being.[[117]](#footnote-118)

Finally, there has been Saudi involvement in the new activist group “Gulf Coalition against Normalization,” but this has been on an individual basis, with most of those participating living outside of Saudi Arabia.[[118]](#footnote-119) No civil society group from within has been able to take part in this initiative. This is yet another example of how the red lines have shifted in Saudi Arabia; where once Saudi groups were at the helm of civil society activity in the region, today they have taken a backseat.

Overall, the trajectory of increased normalization with Israel is clearly linked to rising repression of Saudi society. As one Gulf activist noted, Palestine is the “great unifier” among different political factions within the Gulf.[[119]](#footnote-120) As such, the Palestinian cause’s mobilizing potential will always be a threat to the Saudi state, especially as the official position diverges further from public opinion.

***Signatories to the Abraham Accords: Bahrain and UAE***

*Bahrain*

Bahrain and the UAE caused an uproar when they moved forward with the Abraham Accords, signing an official peace agreement with Israel. The Accords fully normalized relations between Israel and the two signatories, created bilateral agreements on a number of economic issues, established embassies, and set the stage for the development of a shared “strategic agenda.”[[120]](#footnote-121)

But this development came after steady steps towards normalization in recent years from both parties. Bahrain for instance had previously acquiesced to US pressure to close its “anti-normalization” office, developed ties with Israeli security companies, and hosted Jared Kushner’s “Peace to Prosperity” conference. This normalization trend in Bahrain picked up pace following the Free Trade Agreement between Bahrain and the US,[[121]](#footnote-122) and intensified following the Arab Spring as the regime dealt with challenges to its durability.

Unlike more repressive states in the region, however, Bahrain has a comparatively vibrant civil society, and citizens have the space to engage in ways that are not tolerated in other parts of the region. Bahraini groups have a long history of political engagement, many with origins from the early 1930’s. The issue of Palestine features prominently, beginning 1939 when Bahrainis organized the first Committee for the Support of Palestine.[[122]](#footnote-123) Moreover, the anti-normalization office in Bahrain existed prior to the state itself. Although the government took major steps on the path to normalization, they faced enormous pressure from civil society for each intensification.

Nevertheless, with each step, **repression** became more heavy-handed. For instance, the Bahraini regime has become increasingly restrictive of NGOs via legal means. This is similar to trends occurring worldwide, often attributed to linkages between regimes and Russia or China.[[123]](#footnote-124) In this case, however, this comes with increased linkages to Israel. Bahraini authorities have enforced barriers to operation for civil society in order to decrease the frequency of events and diffuse the mobilizing capacity of pro-Palestinian activism. This is important because such activism appeals to groups from across all major political factions and sectarian identities.[[124]](#footnote-125) As such, its unifying potential worries the Bahraini regime.[[125]](#footnote-126)

Specifically, restrictions have increased by implementing more stringent registration requirements. In Bahrain, civil society organizations must be registered officially through a relevant ministry. Often times, however, the scope of such groups goes beyond their officially stated objectives. One example is Nadi Al Ouruba (Arabism Club), which is technically a sports club where people can meet to play soccer. However, it has historically moved beyond that scope, and was known to also hold intellectual activities for its members which was tolerated in the past. Today, the government has exercised greater control over such activities by forcing groups to adhere to their narrow, officially-registered objectives. The state aggressively shuts down any activity that goes beyond official ministry registration.[[126]](#footnote-127)

The crackdown on the Bahraini Democratic Youth Society is a case in point. This group is registered through the Ministry of Social Affairs, and attempted to hold an event related to normalization in the Gulf. They were contacted by a representative of the Bahraini government in the midst of the live-feed, and were ordered to turn off the cameras and end the discussion. Activists had no recourse but to comply.[[127]](#footnote-128) Similarly during the Kushner conference, the government ordered normalization activists to cancel an announced event within their own office space.[[128]](#footnote-129) According to activists, this demonstrated that the government’s official line regarding normalization was in tension with public opinion, and so the regime had to exercise a heavier hand in their monitoring. Much like authoritarian regimes engaging in innovative tactics elsewhere, the Bahraini regime does not have to “either securely forbid or insecurely permit civil society groups,” but rather attempts to “control them within a self-defined space of accountability.”[[129]](#footnote-130)

In the lead-up to the Abraham Accords, the government passed a new bylaw through the Civil Service Bureau which stipulated that public employees would not be allowed to express an opinion contrary to official policy.[[130]](#footnote-131) Professional associations, such as the Association of Journalists and the Association of Lawyers, spoke out against the bylaws, making the claim it was unconstitutional. Many assumed the bylaw was passed to offset public criticism of new economic measures.[[131]](#footnote-132) However, it became clear that it was in fact passed to offset criticism of the impending normalization announcements. Activists note that even if the government does not employ the law to prosecute its citizens, the wording of the bylaw is so vague that it will essentially impose self-censorship on many who do not want to lose their livelihoods for the sake of criticizing foreign policy. This is yet another example of the relationship between ties to Israel and **increased repression**.

The encouragement of self-censorship is particularly harmful in an authoritarian state such as Bahrain, as it obfuscates public opinion and **frays social ties**. Activists say that the space to discuss freely is “more restricted than it was in the past,” and this is especially the case given that the media discourse parrots the official line.[[132]](#footnote-133) The public is “confused,” activists say, unsure of who is safe to speak to, and who is not.[[133]](#footnote-134) The impact of government restrictions in Bahrain is thus clear, and unsurprising: to discourage mobilization by silencing dissenting voices, either directly or through self-censorship.

Bahrain is also actively **acquiring repressive technologies**, becoming further embroiled with widely-criticized Israeli security companies, such as NSO group. Alongside Saudi Arabia and the Emirates, Bahrain has purchased the Pegasus program, responsible for “extracting data, messages, browser history and contacts, from phones,” in order to target human rights activists and monitor dissidents. Bahrain also uses the “Pearl” surveillance operator, one of 12 in the region, to spy on opposition.[[134]](#footnote-135)

When the Abraham Accords were announced, protests broke out in a number of Bahraini towns. Over 17 civil society organizations, representing a wide spectrum, signed a joint statement rejecting the normalization of their country's government.[[135]](#footnote-136) Protests were quickly shut down, however. While activists persist in their dissent, they understand that repercussions are coming. Some have already been called for questioning and “put on notice.” One organizer says: “We will continue in our commitment, but the reality is we must tread lightly.”[[136]](#footnote-137)

*UAE*

In an effort to excise adherents of Muslim Brotherhood ideology in the country and align themselves closer with the US, the UAE has sought out stronger ties with Israel. Their shared animosity to political Islam and democratic uprisings in the region also facilitated this convergence. The UAE explains this alignment in terms of “promoting tolerance” and cultural advancement, a key focus of its regime since 2013.

The UAE enforces the de-politicization of both its citizens and expatriate communities. There are few protests, if any, and no violent mass crackdown; instead, the regime works to demobilize their population through “soft” repression and high degrees of surveillance, to ensure public opinion trends are managed. Their ties to the state of Israel, its intelligence services, and surveillance companies directly facilitates this goal.

Thus the UAE has acquired a great deal of **repressive technology** from Israel and engaged in military-to-military coordination, including joint exercises and shared use of surveillance satellites. This helps the Emiratis develop military effectiveness and position themselves as more stalwart allies to the US-Israel axis than some of their neighbors. These military ties predated the Abraham Accords, as did deals with Israeli surveillance companies. For instance, Emirati-registered company “Dark Matter” was exposed as being staffed and run by ex-Israel Defense Forces officials.[[137]](#footnote-138) Another example is the UAE’s multi-million-dollar contract with Israeli company “AGT international,” in exchange for drone equipment and surveillance tools.[[138]](#footnote-139) The UAE is also one of the NSO group’s dedicated customers in the region, with the dedicated surveillance operator “Falcon.”[[139]](#footnote-140)

The case of Ahmed Mansour is a stark example of the impact of Emirati-Israeli coordination. Mansour is an Emirati human rights activist who exposed the UAE’s use of Pegasus hacking software, when he was targeted by an NSO Group attempt and sought out Amnesty International for guidance. This set in motion an investigation, and revealed the extent of such hacking software and its use in authoritarian states around the world.[[140]](#footnote-141) In response, the UAE prosecuted him for “ruining the UAE’s reputation,” for which he will serve 10 years.[[141]](#footnote-142)

Mansour’s case is not an aberration. His trial is in line with the **increased repression** of civil society in general and pro-Palestine activism in particular since the Emirates began its turn towards Israel. The UAE’s normalization office, intended to monitor attempts to engage with the Israeli state or industry, was closed after 2004.[[142]](#footnote-143) The educational curriculum which was once quite pro-Palestinian, stressing the importance of solidarity with Palestine and its centrality to the Muslim faith, changed drastically in the last decade. The regime rapidly tightened the space to organize on all fronts during this time, also closing the labor unions.[[143]](#footnote-144)

In an attempt to combat this repressive turn, a number of organizers and prominent Islamists formed the “Committee for the Resistance of Normalization” in 2002. They worked to raise awareness about normalization in the UAE and act as whistleblowers on this issue. This committee persisted until 2013, following the Arab Spring, when they received threats and decided to disband.

The time period after the Arab Spring was the most outwardly repressive, particularly against Islamists with a reformist position on the UAE’s system of governance. Members of Islah, an organization which openly sympathized with the Muslim Brotherhood, called for free and fair legislative elections.[[144]](#footnote-145) This provoked authorities, leading to an arrest campaign against 94 individuals. They were detained in secret locations, tortured, and then sentenced to long imprisonments in what is widely considered a sham trial.[[145]](#footnote-146) At the same time, student groups such as “Youth for Jerusalem” as well as student unions of Emirati universities were closed down.[[146]](#footnote-147) This was the backdrop by which the Committee for Resistance against Normalization met for the last time.[[147]](#footnote-148)

Since then, civil society has been all but destroyed in the UAE. Those who sympathize with the Palestinian cause, or oppose the country’s official peace policy, find themselves attacked as being “intolerant” of others, and their position on Palestine likened to prejudice rather than a stance against the policies of the Israeli state.[[148]](#footnote-149) Many are forced to retreat into their homes, and Emiratis have become much more atomized as a result.

Particularly in the wake of the UAE’s normalization announcement, the regime has intensified its messaging with regards to what is considered unacceptable discourse. Activists report that Emirati phone numbers all received a message from the government warning them to not speak out against official policy, alluding to the normalization announcement.[[149]](#footnote-150) A prominent Emirati Twitter account also likened disapproval of the normalization deal with antisemitism, and encouraged people to report any such incidents via a designated app.[[150]](#footnote-151) An Emirati author made news by criticizing normalization policy and then being banned from travel.[[151]](#footnote-152) Those who find themselves labeled opposition are becoming estranged from their families, as family members refuse to maintain ties for fear of repercussions.[[152]](#footnote-153) These are all examples of how **social ties have frayed** in the aftermath of peace.

As a result, resistance to official policy mostly comes from Emiratis now in exile. Many activists found themselves outside the UAE, unable to return, following the UAE 94 trial. One activist says many in exile today use the expertise they gained as organizers and members of groups such as Islah to connect with each other and build campaigns.[[153]](#footnote-154) The Emirati government exerts pressure on their families, and this has weakened their personal relationships and connections to Emiratis on the ground. Nevertheless, they continue to advocate from their exile on a number of issues related to the detainees, Palestine, and democratic governance.

Hamad al-Shamsi is a founding member of the new Emiratis Against Normalization group, which launched following the UAE’s announcement of a deal with Israel. He says that he already sees the impact of increased repression within the UAE as a result of the Abraham Accords, and expects the agreement to push them further away from the goal of accountable government. But, in spite of threats to their safety, he notes: “We have nothing to lose anymore. The Emirati government has already gone too far.”[[154]](#footnote-155)

The coordination between the UAE and Israel was an open secret for a number of years, made official policy following the peace agreement. Ties are expected to increase.[[155]](#footnote-156) Authoritarian practices are thus expected to become more effective than ever before.

**Discussion**

This analysis shows that peace initiatives facilitate authoritarian practices under certain conditions. The cases described above show how such initiatives may lead to increased repression, fraying of social ties, and the proliferation of authoritarian technologies.

This article makes three main contributions. First, it points to the consequences of peace initiatives within authoritarian contexts, and builds on the literature regarding “illiberal peace.” When underlying issues at the heart of the conflict – particularly, in this case, ongoing occupation and political violence – continue to persist, steps towards peace will reinforce authoritarian practices. Moreover, peace initiatives in authoritarian contexts, without public support, necessitate repression.

Second, the analysis here also contributes to our understanding of the transregional dimension of authoritarianism, which has thus far been discussed in the context of economic development. Crucially, I expand this framework to include the authoritarian consequences of “peace” in the name of political/cultural development. This should give academics who study this topic, as well as practitioners interested in this part of the world, pause. Peace under certain circumstances may not be an optimal outcome.

Finally, it is worth considering how regime type may have little impact on whether or not a state facilitates authoritarian practices. Israel is defined as a democracy, and thus has received little attention in the literature on counterrevolutionary currents in the region despite how heavily it is implicated in some of these trends. This skews our understanding of the realities of authoritarianism in the Arab world, and neglects the fact that there may indeed be democratic convergence with authoritarianism under certain conditions.

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**Appendix**

Section 1: List of Interviews

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Number** | **Date** | **Individual** | **Place** | **Name** |
| 2019.1 | October 13, 2019 | Activist, QAYON | Qatar | Anonymous |
| 2019.2 | October 27, 2019 | Activist, QAYON | Qatar | Anonymous |
| 2019.3 | November 3, 2019 | Activist, Founding member, QAYON | Qatar | Anonymous |
| 2020.1 | August 26, 2020 | Activist, Gulf Can | Bahrain | Anonymous |
| 2020.2 | September 18, 2020 | Activist, Gulf Can | Emirates | Alaa al-Siddiq |
| 2020.3 | September 25, 2020 | Activist, Emiratis Against Normalization | Emirates | Hamad al-Shamsi |
| 2020.4 | October 1, 2020 | Activist, QAYON | Qatar | Anonymous |
| 2020.5 | October 10, 2020 | Scholar | Saudi Arabia | Anonymous |
| 2021.1 | February 1, 2021 | Activist, Gulf Can | Bahrain | Anonymous |
| 2021.2 | February 6, 2021 | Activist, QAYON | Qatar | Anonymous |
| 2021.3 | February 13, 2021 | Activist, QAYON | Qatar | Anonymous |
| 2021.4 | February 24, 2021 | Activist, QAYON | Qatar | Anonymous |
| 2021.5 | March 6, 2021 | Activist, Founding member, Youth for Jerusalem | Bahrain | Anonymous |

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61. #2019.2 [↑](#footnote-ref-62)
62. Ibid. One example is the support of key officials in the QAYON campaign against the Wonder Woman film for its feature of Israeli actress Gal Gadot. [↑](#footnote-ref-63)
63. #2021.3 [↑](#footnote-ref-64)
64. #2021.4 [↑](#footnote-ref-65)
65. #2019.1, #2021.2 [↑](#footnote-ref-66)
66. #2019.1 [↑](#footnote-ref-67)
67. #2019.1, #2019.3, #2021.3 [↑](#footnote-ref-68)
68. #2021.3 [↑](#footnote-ref-69)
69. #2019.3, #2021.3 [↑](#footnote-ref-70)
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71. #2019.3, #2021.2 [↑](#footnote-ref-72)
72. #2019.3 [↑](#footnote-ref-73)
73. #2021.3 [↑](#footnote-ref-74)
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