

Israel's Honeymoon with the United Arab Emirates Is Grotesque

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Since normalizing relations in September, Israel and the United Arab Emirates have teamed up to do what both do best: trample on democratic freedoms, commit atrocities, and whitewash occupation.

Back in 2010, the *New York Times*' Thomas Friedman issued the following [complaint](#): "Destructive critics dismiss Gaza as an Israeli prison, without ever mentioning that had Hamas decided — after Israel unilaterally left Gaza — to turn it into Dubai rather than Tehran, Israel would have behaved differently, too."

Never mind that Israel never "left" Gaza — or that even if Hamas had managed to transform the diminutive Palestinian coastal enclave into the capital of Iran, international law would not have authorized the Israelis to then convert it into the "[world's largest open-air prison](#)." It's also unclear how any territory could be turned into Dubai while under siege and frequent [bombardment](#), or how Gazans would go about building malls with ski slopes — or building anything, for that matter — when Israel [intermittently blocks construction materials](#) from coming into the narrow strip of land.

Now, courtesy of the September [normalization agreement](#) between Israel and the United Arab Emirates — the culmination of a long-standing clandestine love affair — it seems the Palestinians will finally get to experience a taste of Dubai. (And Emirati alcohol consumers will get a taste of Israeli-made [wine](#) from the illegally occupied Golan Heights.)

In a recent CNN [dispatch](#) titled "The UAE and Israel's whirlwind honeymoon has gone beyond normalization," correspondent Ben Wedeman writes of the "mutual enthusiasm" infecting the Israeli government and the federation of Arab sheikhdoms, so much so that the UAE "appears to have dropped, in practical terms, any objections to Israel's occupation of Arab lands." That's no accident. Disappearing the occupation is a primary function of normalization, fitting right in with the Friedmanite approach to Middle East peace, which posits that, if the Palestinians would just stop bitching about being occupied and [massacred](#) and get on with their lives, they, too, could be Dubai — the equivalent of telling a person in a burning house to simply ignore the flames.

Wedeman catalogues the perks of the overzealous Emirati-Israeli honeymoon: mutual visa exemption, the aforementioned wine, an excursion to the UAE by Israeli settler leaders from the West Bank, direct flights between Tel Aviv and Abu Dhabi scheduled to start early next year, and an arrangement where the UAE will "finance with the US and Israel a project to

‘modernize’ Israeli checkpoints in the West Bank used to control and monitor the movement of Palestinians.”

Presumably, “modernization” does not mean that Israeli soldiers will stop [beating](#), [killing](#), detaining, and otherwise abusing Palestinians at checkpoints. But perhaps the Emiratis can help install state-of-the-art mobile maternity wards to deal with the Palestinian women [forced to give birth](#) there.

To be sure, it’s not like the checkpoints aren’t “modern” enough already. As NBC News [reported](#) last year, Microsoft has “invested in a startup that uses facial recognition to surveil Palestinians throughout the West Bank, in spite of the tech giant’s public pledge to avoid using the technology if it encroaches on democratic freedoms.”

That’s no turnoff for the UAE, where democratic freedoms are entirely absent and the slightest criticism of the government is grounds for [detention](#), [torture](#), or [disappearance](#). And what do you know: Emirati-Israeli collaboration regarding surveillance far predated the official unveiling of amorous bilateral relations. In 2015, a *Middle East Eye* [article](#) quoted a description of Abu Dhabi’s Israeli-installed mass civil spying system: “Every person is monitored from the moment they leave their doorstep to the moment they return to it. Their work, social and behavioral patterns are recorded, analyzed and archived.”

Call it modern barbarism — a right-wing neoliberal dream where basic rights are supplanted by skyscrapers, artificial islands, the annual [Dubai Shopping Festival](#), and other distracting obscenities built on the backs of a migrant work force toiling in “[virtual slavery](#).”

For their normalization efforts, Israeli prime minister **Benjamin Netanyahu** and [Abu Dhabi](#) crown prince **Mohammed bin Zayed** have been [nominated](#) for a Nobel Peace Prize. Perverse, unless you recall that former US president **Barack Obama**, the man who ordered the dropping of at least [26,171 bombs](#) on seven Muslim-majority countries in 2016 alone, also received the prize. “Peace,” meanwhile, is not currently an option for Palestinians, Yemenis, and other regional inhabitants whose lives are sacrificed in the interest of arms industry profits and similar fixtures of “modernity” — all with US backing, and an imperial narrative that insists Iran is the one causing all the trouble.

So the honeymooners are getting off scot-free, whether for killing [2,251 people](#) in Gaza in a matter of fifty days or for helping oversee the [sexual torture](#) of Yemeni detainees and mass [starvation](#) of Yemeni children as part of the Saudi-led coalition. And as normalization forges ahead, it’s nothing short of terrifying that anyone finds this normal.

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