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# Secretary Antony J. Blinken and Israeli Alternate Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Yair Lapid and United Arab Emirates Foreign Minister Sheikh Abdullah Bin Zayed Al Nahyan at a Joint Press Availability

## REMARKS

**ANTONY J. BLINKEN, SECRETARY OF STATE**

**BENJAMIN FRANKLIN ROOM**

**WASHINGTON, D.C.**

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**SECRETARY BLINKEN:** Well, good morning or, almost, good afternoon, everyone. Just over a year ago, the leaders of Israel and the United Arab Emirates signed the Abraham Accords. Today, I am honored to host Foreign Minister Lapid, Foreign Minister Sheikh Abdullah, to review the progress that's been made in the past year in the normalization of relations, and what more we can do together to shape a more peaceful and prosperous region. The UAE-Israel relationship has, I think it's fair to say, flourished this past year. This May, Israel opened an embassy in the UAE, the first it has ever had to a Gulf nation. And a few days ago, Israel's new ambassador to the UAE presented his credentials. In July, the UAE opened an embassy in Israel, the first Gulf state to take that action.

In addition to these diplomatic strides, the people-to-people ties between the two countries are also thriving, even with COVID. Direct flights are now connecting Israel and the UAE. Tourists are seizing the opportunity. Around 200,000 Israelis have visited the Emirates this past year alone. We strongly support these historic steps, and we're committed to continue building on the efforts of the last administration to expand the circle of countries with normalized relations with Israel in the years ahead.

We believe that normalization can and should be a force for progress, not only between Israel and Arab countries and other countries in the region and beyond, but also between Israelis and Palestinians. As President Biden has said, Israelis and Palestinians equally deserve to live safely and securely and to enjoy equal measures of freedom, prosperity, democracy. The President has also been clear that a two-state solution is the best way to ensure Israel's future as a Jewish and democratic state, living in peace alongside a viable, sovereign, and democratic Palestinian state.

Today, our three countries discussed two new working groups that we are launching together. The first is on religious coexistence. This is a moment of rising anti-Semitism, rising Islamophobia, and we want Israel, the United Arab Emirates, and the United States to work together to build tolerance and ensure that all religious groups can worship in their traditional ways without violence, without intimidation, without discrimination.

The second working group is on water and energy, critical issues for our countries in the face of the climate crisis and places where the United States, Israel, and the UAE can be in a sense

greater than the sum of our parts to the benefit of our people, the region, and even the world. We're very pleased that Israel has joined the Agriculture Innovation Mission for Climate, a joint U.S. and UAE initiative to catalyze new investment in climate-smart agriculture. Israeli and Emirati firms are already planning to collaborate on a number of renewable projects.

And I want to commend the UAE for its plan to achieve net zero emissions by 2050, the first country in the GCC to do so, and Israel for its new plan to reduce emissions by 85 percent by 2050.

Finally, the trilateral partnership also makes it possible for our countries to discuss other urgent regional issues more effectively, to do it together. For example, today we talked about a range of regional security issues, including Iran, Syria, Ethiopia. That's what normalization has made possible; transformative partnerships on the urgent challenges facing our countries and facing the world. And that's why it's so important, and it's why I am deeply grateful to both of you for being here today and for the work that we're doing together. So thank you very much, and with that, Yair.

**FOREIGN MINISTER LAPID:** Thank you, Secretary of State Blinken, Your Highness Sheikh Abdullah bin Zayed, friends. Two weeks ago in Bahrain, I met a king in his palace, an American admiral on his ship, and a Jew who cared for the only synagogue almost single-handedly. And they all said the same thing. They said no one believed the things happening here are possible.

And they were wrong. The things that are happening are happening exactly because people believed, because today there are leaders in the Middle East who believe we can change history together. In the past four month, Israel opened embassies and offices in the UAE, in Morocco, in Bahrain. We have turned the cold peace with Egypt and Jordan into a warm peace – we signed economic and civil agreements – and we greatly strengthened our relations with the European Union and with our neighbors in the Mediterranean.

His Highness Sheikh Abdullah and I have become friends and partners. Our friendship is based on shared values, on moderation, on religious tolerance, on the importance of fighting terror and radicalization. The partnership is based on economics, progress, and technological excellence. This partnership isn't just between Jews and Arabs, but between citizens of the world who want to be partners in the fight against climate change, against poverty, against the pandemic that has

taken the life of millions.

President Kennedy said, all people are entitled to a decent way of life. This includes, of course, the Palestinians. Our goal is to work with the Palestinian Authority to ensure that every child has that opportunity.

At the center of my visit here is the concern about Iran's race to nuclear capability. Iran is becoming a nuclear threshold country. Every day that passes, every delay in negotiations brings Iran closer to a nuclear bomb. The Iranians are clearly dragging their heels, trying to cheat the world to continue to enrich uranium, to develop their ballistic missile program.

Secretary of State Blinken and I are sons of Holocaust survivors. We know there are moments when nations must use force to protect the world from evil. If a terror regime is going to acquire a nuclear weapon, we must act. We must make clear that the civilized world won't allow it. If the Iranians don't believe the world is serious about stopping them, they'll race to the bomb.

Israel reserves the right to act at any given moment, in any way. That is not only our right; it is also our responsibility. Iran has publicly stated it wants to wipe us out. We have no intention of letting this happen.

I don't want to conclude with fears, but with hopes. We are writing a new chapter in our history. There is an alliance of moderates focused on life, focused on hope, focused on optimism, focused on looking forward.

I thank you both for this alliance, for the friendship we have. It is a source of hope for the whole world. Thank you.

**FOREIGN MINISTER ABDULLAH BIN ZAYED:** Secretary Blinken, for us, having us both – my dear friend Yair Lapid, the foreign minister of Israel, myself – in D.C. is a strong commitment of the United States in building bridges, yes, but building bridges between two successful nations, but also two successful nations which are committed and devoted for further development, changing the narrative in the region, especially among our youth, towards a more positive one.

Our entire effort towards the future should be based on how can we make our people respect and admire good successes in the region. Unfortunately, in the last few decades, we haven't seen many of those. And what I believe the United States is telling the rest of the world in embracing the Emirates and Israel is that the United States is serious about changing this

narrative in the region, and thank you for that, Secretary Blinken.

We in the UAE are very proud that in less than 50 years of our federation, we've managed to come where we are today. And how can we create a nation which respects values but also respects and celebrates tolerance?

I'm sure that this would have a further effect in the region, and I'm sure that the more of a successful UAE-Israeli relationship there'll be, that would not only encourage the region, but also encourage the Israeli people and the Palestinian people that this path works, that this path is worth not only investing in but also taking the risk.

We are extremely impressed, obviously, with our growing relationship with Israel, but we will always depend that we have a friend, a partner in the U.S., which will excite us and will show us how to do things even better. So thank you, Secretary.

**MR PRICE:** We'll now turn to questions. We will start with Will Mauldin of *The Wall Street Journal*.

**QUESTION:** Thank you so much. Sheikh Abdullah, I wanted to ask if the conflict with Yemen came up, and if so, what was discussed in terms of humanitarian or – humanitarian efforts or possible durable ceasefire involving you or your neighbors?

For Foreign Minister Lapid, I did want to ask: I saw that you spoke yesterday with Jake Sullivan, the National Security Advisor, about an alternative plan to the nuclear agreement if Iran doesn't come back to the table. I'm wondering if you discussed that with Secretary Blinken or if you will discuss that with him, and what that would involve – what you would want it to involve.

And then finally, for Secretary Blinken, I wanted to ask also about Iran. Do you expect Iran to return to the negotiating table imminently in Vienna? And if not, how much time do you think they should have? A couple of months? Should it be sometime next year?

And I also wanted to ask you, if I may, about the consulate in Jerusalem. Would that be something that you made progress on with Foreign Minister Lapid? Is there any chance that that will be opened, which is something you had envisioned after traveling to Israel? Thank you.

**FOREIGN MINISTER ABDULLAH BIN ZAYED:** Well, Yemen is always on the agenda with friends, and we have to just keep in mind that what's dragging us in the situation is the lack of will and commitment on the Houthi side in ending this conflict. We are all working very hard among

friends to ensure that the Yemenis can have a better life. But at the same time, we have to keep in mind that we don't end up with a situation where we have another Hizballah threatening the borders of Saudi Arabia. And the Houthis have managed to develop their capabilities in the last few years in a way which is much faster than the trajectory of Hizballah developing its capabilities.

So absolutely, we would like to end this today. We would like to help with the rest of the international community in developing and rebuilding Yemen. But we have to make sure that we have enough partners and international understanding that we don't have another Southern Lebanon situation in Yemen.

**FOREIGN MINISTER LAPID:** Well, as President Biden has said in the visit when Prime Minister Bennett was visiting Washington, I think the exact goal, if diplomacy fails, other options will be on the table. And yes, we are discussing in length the option and I discussed this with Mr. Sullivan, we're going to discuss this in the bilateral meeting with Secretary Blinken, and we have mentioned this even in this session.

As I was saying in my opening remarks, sometimes the world has to show its hand in order to make sure Iran understands the consequences of running to become a threshold country. We're not going to allow this to happen, and I think everybody in this room share this sentiment, and we are discussing how to make sure this will never happen.

**SECRETARY BLINKEN:** We're united in the proposition that Iran cannot be allowed to acquire a nuclear weapon, and President Biden is committed to that proposition. We believe that the diplomatic path is the most effective way to ensure that that doesn't happen.

But as we've had occasion to discuss in recent weeks, despite the fact that we've made abundantly clear over the last nine months that we are prepared to return to full compliance with the JCPOA if Iran does the same, what we are seeing – or maybe more accurately not seeing from Tehran now – suggests that they're not. And time is running short because, as we've also had an opportunity to discuss together, we are getting closer to a point at which returning to compliance with the JCPOA will not in and of itself recapture the benefits of the JCPOA, and that's because Iran has been using this time to advance its nuclear program in a variety of ways, including enriching uranium to 20 percent and even 60 percent, using more advanced centrifuges, acquiring more knowledge.

And so that runway is getting shorter. I'm not going to put a specific date on it, but with every passing day and Iran's refusal to engage in good faith, the runway gets short. And so as the foreign minister said, we are discussing this among ourselves, and we will look at every option to deal with the challenge posed by Iran. We continue to believe that diplomacy is the most effective way to do that, but it takes two to engage in diplomacy, and we have not – we have not seen from Iran a willingness to do that at this point.

With regard to the second part of your question, Will, I mentioned this in my opening remarks: We believe strongly that Palestinians and Israelis equally deserve to live safely, securely, with equal measures of freedom, prosperity, democracy. And we will continue our own efforts toward that end. And in a sense, I can't stress this enough, advancing equal measures of freedom and dignity is important in its own right and as a means to advance toward a negotiated two-state solution. So our approach will be to work toward a more peaceful, secure, prosperous future for the people of the Middle East as a whole, and for Israelis and Palestinians as well in particular. We are unwavering in our commitment to Israel's security, and we will work to strengthen all aspects of the U.S.-Israel partnership.

To advance the goal that I mentioned, we will work closely with Israel, deepen our diplomatic ties with the Palestinians, and consult with partners in the region and beyond who have a common interest in supporting efforts to advance a lasting peace. And as I said in May, we'll be moving forward with the process of opening a consulate as part of deepening those ties with the Palestinians.

**MR PRICE:** We'll turn to Yuna Leibzon from Channel 12.

**QUESTION:** Thank you. First question, Secretary Blinken. You just mentioned that all paths are on the table and the diplomatic path is your preferred path. But is a military path also something – is that something that you're considering that is also on the table?

And the second question is: Israeli officials, including Prime Minister Bennett, have said that Israel is operating all the time against the Iran nuclear deal, including that it has the right to defend itself. Is that something that is being done in coordination with you?

And a question to Minister Lapid about Abraham Accords. Have other countries been discussed? Has

**FOREIGN MINISTER LAPID:** You have to raise your voice a little bit.

**QUESTION:** Sorry. A question to you about the Abraham Accords. Are other countries being discussed? Has there been any kind of process or something new that you can share with us about the efforts joining other countries? Thank you.

**SECRETARY BLINKEN:** Thank you. I'm happy to start.

First, to be very clear, Israel has the right to defend itself and we strongly support that proposition. We've also been clear, as I said a moment ago, that we believe a diplomatic solution to our concerns with Iran – concerns that are shared among the three of us and among many countries around the world, including our European partners, including Russia and China – that a diplomatic path is the best and most effective way to do that. And so we've been clear that, as I said, we would like to see a mutual return to compliance of the JCPOA. But Iran's responses, or rather lack thereof, have not been encouraging.

So even as we remain ready to return to talks and think that we should do so soon, if Iran has a realistic position, we continue to believe that we could reach an agreement on a return to mutual compliance. But for the reasons I cited a few minutes ago, the runway that we have left to do that is getting shorter and shorter, and so we are watching Iran's comments, posture very, very carefully. And as the minister said, we are prepared to turn to other options if Iran doesn't change course, and these consultations with our allies and partners are a part of that.

**FOREIGN MINISTER LAPID:** I would like to start by repeating what the Secretary of State just said. Yes, other options are going to be on the table if diplomacy fails. And by saying other options, I think everybody understands here, in Israel, in the Emirates, and in Tehran what is it that we mean.

About the Abraham Accords, yes, we want to expand the Abraham Accords. We're working on expanding the Abraham Accords. But first and foremost, and we've discussed this today at length, we want to make sure the current agreements we have will be a success story. And it is so far a success story on the people-to-people level, on the ability to make this into business, energy, water, the working groups we have decided to open today. These are all great achievements, and we are going to push forward as hard as we can on this while working on expanding the Abraham Accords to other countries, including the ones you don't think of



EXPANDING THE ABRAHAM ACCORDS TO OTHER COUNTRIES, INCLUDING THE ONES YOU DON'T THINK OF.

If I may I will say a few words in Hebrew, but it's going to be the same. (Laughter.)

(In Hebrew.)

You listened to me like you understand every word in Hebrew.

**SECRETARY BLINKEN:** Every third word.

**FOREIGN MINISTER LAPID:** Every third word. I know you know some.

**MR PRICE:** Our final question will come from Joyce Karam of *The National*.

**QUESTION:** Yes, hi. Thank you. Joyce Karam with *The National* newspaper. My question to Sheikh Abdullah: A year on, how is the UAE planning to leverage the Abraham Accords to advance a two-state solution? And given that your counterpart, Mr. Lapid, has already visited Abu Dhabi in June, are you planning a visit to Israel in the near future?

And to Secretary Blinken, two quick questions. You mentioned that the administration is working to expand the pool of the Abraham Accords. What incentives are you providing to other countries to join? And allow me a question on Syria to Secretary Blinken. A number of Arab countries are resuming normal ties with the Assad regime. Does the Biden administration endorse this rapprochement and what is the U.S. policy in that regard? Thank you.

**FOREIGN MINISTER ABDULLAH BIN ZAYED:** Well, Foreign Minister Yair was kind enough to invite me to visit Israel, and I'm going to visit soon to meet a friend, but also a partner. We need to not only celebrate this relationship, but look at new venues of cooperation. Today, one of the initiatives that we've signed off on when it comes to climate change – we are extremely interested in seeing how we can work with Israeli technology, Emirati technology in building not only bridges between us, but with third parties as well.

The Palestinians are going to be the most important element of the success of peace in the region. We cannot just talk about peace in the region without the neighbors – the Palestinians and the Israelis are not in talking terms to start with. So I'm quite excited to see that in the last few weeks, Israeli ministers are starting to meet with the PA. This is a good start. We have to keep encouraging them, but also in broadening the opportunities for them. Today, I think the

relationship between Israel and the UAE helps us, both of us, to be more candid with each other, but also to encourage the others whenever there is more to be done. So I think the UAE-Israeli relationship will be not only a way of encouraging our two people, but beyond, in the region. So I look forward to seeing you, Yair, in Israel soon.

**FOREIGN MINISTER LAPID:** My house is open to you. You know that.

**FOREIGN MINISTER ABDULLAH BIN ZAYED:** Thank you, sir.

**FOREIGN MINISTER LAPID:** And my wife is expecting for you to come over for dinner.

**SECRETARY BLINKEN:** I'm tempted to leave it there, but – (laughter) – let me talk about Syria first and then come to the second part of the – the first part of the question second.

First, to put this in focus, these initial nine months of the administration we have been focused on a few things when it comes to Syria: Expanding humanitarian access for people who desperately need that assistance, and we had some success, as you know, with renewing the critical corridor in northwestern Syria to do that; sustaining the campaign that we have with the coalition against ISIS and al-Qaida in Syria; making clear our commitment, our ongoing commitment to demand accountability from the Assad regime and the preservation of basic international norms like promoting human rights and nonproliferation through the imposition of targeted sanctions; and sustaining local ceasefires, which are in place in different parts of the country. So this has been the focus of our action for these last nine months.

As we're moving forward, in the time ahead, keeping violence down; increasing humanitarian assistance and focusing our military efforts on any terrorist groups that pose a threat to us or to our partners, with the intent and capacity to do that. These are going to be the critical areas of focus for us, and they're also, I think, important to advancing a broader political settlement to the Syrian conflict consistent with UN Security Council Resolution 2254.

What we have not done and what we do not intend to do is to express any support for efforts to normalize relations or rehabilitate Mr. Assad, or lifted a single sanction on Syria or changed our position to oppose the reconstruction of Syria until there is irreversible progress toward a political solution, which we believe is necessary and vital.

The question of incentives. I think – for others who might join in the normalization effort, I think

the incentives are being demonstrated every single day by the UAE and Israel. And the incentives are simply this: These efforts and the normalization is profoundly in the interests of the people in the countries in question, and is providing all sorts of new opportunities, as evidenced by the extraordinary jump in tourism, the business relationships that are being built every single day, the work that our countries are doing together increasingly in a wide variety of areas. Those are very powerful incentives, because it simply means that people will have a better life, more opportunity, more security, more prosperity.

So I think, going forward, it's exactly what Sheikh Abdullah said. The proof is in what has already been created, and I think as more and more people see that, understand it, become aware of it, they will want to do the same thing.

And I'd just conclude by saying – I think I mentioned this before – one of the most powerful things is this. Abraham in the Bible was known for having the temerity to argue with God, to ask why, or maybe even more appropriately, why not. Israel, the United Arab Emirates, they asked, "Why not?" And now they are demonstrating every single day why it is so important that countries come together and work together and join together and create more opportunity for their peoples.

So this is a very powerful answer, and I suspect that more and more countries in the region and beyond will see that in the months and years ahead. Thank you.

**MR PRICE:** That concludes the press conference. We invite our delegations to remain seated as the press leaves the room. Thank you.

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