Israeli, UAE technology firms pen deal on virus research

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In this Wednesday, April 15, 2020 file photo, a motorcycle delivery man rides past a billboard urging people to stay home over the coronavirus pandemic in Dubai, United Arab Emirates. G42, an Abu Dhabi-based company specializing in artificial intelligence and cloud computing, has signed a partnership with two major Israeli defense firms to research ways of combating the coronavirus pandemic. (AP Photo/Jon Gambrell, File)

A state-linked technology company in the United Arab Emirates has signed a partnership with two major Israeli defense firms to research ways of combating the coronavirus pandemic.

The agreement, announced late Thursday, comes just weeks after the UAE warned Israel that proceeding with its planned annexation of parts of the occupied West Bank would upend its efforts to improve ties with Arab states.

G42, an Abu Dhabi-based company specializing in artificial intelligence and cloud computing, signed a memorandum of understanding with Rafael and Israel Aerospace Industries, the UAE's state-run WAM news agency reported. It said executives held a signing ceremony by video link between the two countries, which do not have diplomatic relations.

Rafael and IAI's Elta subsidiary confirmed the agreement. Elta, which specializes in sensors, radars, electronic warfare and communication systems, said they would cooperate on research and technology focused on artificial intelligence, sensors and lasers.

They said the collaboration would not only benefit the two countries, but the entire world as it grapples with the pandemic.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who has vowed to annex all of Israel's West Bank settlements as well as the strategic Jordan Valley, had announced an agreement with the UAE a week ago, without providing specifics.

Only two Arab countries, Jordan and Egypt, have made peace with Israel, with the rest saying it must first resolve the conflict with the Palestinians. But Israel has quietly improved ties with Gulf countries in recent years, in part because of their shared concerns about Iran.

In recent weeks, senior UAE officials have warned that annexation would jeopardize those improved ties, but have also suggested that the two countries could set aside their political disputes to collaborate on humanitarian and other projects.

President Donald Trump's Middle East plan, which overwhelmingly favors Israel and was rejected by the Palestinians, would allow Israel to annex up to 30% of the West Bank, which it occupied in the 1967 war along with east Jerusalem and the Gaza Strip. The Palestinians want all three territories to form their future state.

The U.N., European and Arab countries have warned Israel against annexation, which is widely seen as a violation of international law that would dash any remaining hopes of reaching a two-state solution to the conflict.

Group 42, also known as G42, is led by CEO Peng Xiao. He previously ran Pegasus, a subsidiary of DarkMatter, a cybersecurity firm based in the UAE that has recruited Western intelligence agents.

Since late 2016, Dubai police have partnered with Pegasus to use its "big data" application to pool hours of surveillance video to track anyone in the emirate. DarkMatter's hiring of former CIA and National Security Agency analysts has raised concerns, especially as the UAE has harassed and imprisoned human rights activists.

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