

A Year since the Abraham Accords: Pick up the Pace of Normalization

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The Abraham Accords represent a substantial achievement for Israel. At the same time, the potential for improving both Israel's strategic position and its response to the challenges it faces has not been fully realized. The shared regional threat from Iran was, and remains, the primary motive for the Abraham Accords. This drive, however, has lost momentum with the change in United States policy under the Biden administration. Inter alia, it seems that the US is far less willing to provide security and economic rewards to the countries that signed the Abraham Accords. Still, creating a wide range of countries that cooperate toward stability in the Middle East aimed at thwarting Iran's influence in the region remains an important challenge and goal. Israel should therefore supply what it can missing in the security sphere and promote cooperation agreements that highlight the benefits of peace by removing bureaucratic obstacles that delay implementation of the agreements, and by recruiting business concerns and external partners for investment in infrastructure initiatives that contribute to prosperity.

On August 13, 2020, the United States, Israel, and United Arab Emirates (UAE) issued a [joint announcement](#) stating that Israel and UAE were normalizing relations between them. One month later, on September 15, 2020, Israel, UAE, and Bahrain signed the Abraham Accords; declarations of peace by Morocco and Sudan followed soon after. While the agreement with UAE is called a "peace agreement" and was approved by the Knesset, the other agreements are defined as [peace declarations](#).

At a conference of the Emirates Policy Center (EPC) (with which the Institute for National Security Studies (INSS) signed a research cooperation agreement), former UAE Minister of State for Foreign Affairs Dr. Anwar Gargash explained, "The decision to establish diplomatic relations with the State of Israel was motivated by this commitment to shape a new and better future for the region. It was a sovereign national decision and was not targeted at any other country. It was a decision born out of a desire for a much-needed strategic shift and a new pragmatic vision."

The short time that has passed since the Accords were signed provides some perspective, albeit limited, on progress in normalization, the challenges on the agenda, and the latent future potential of these agreements – expanding them to include additional countries and deepening the areas of cooperation. Normalization with UAE is progressing more rapidly and has proven more fruitful than with the other countries, mainly in economic terms. UAE has a special character – a small native population, no active internal opposition, huge natural resources, and a leadership elite committed to a long-term strategic plan, which dictates plans for action that are implemented firmly. UAE regards itself as an exemplar of progress and innovation, and the connection with Israel is designed to serve this purpose. Indeed, since the Abraham Accords were signed, the volume of trade reported between Israel and UAE has reached [\\$500 million](#) (including diamonds). Furthermore, conditions allow a warm peace between Jerusalem and Abu Dhabi, and memoranda of understanding and cooperation agreements have been signed on higher education and culture, in addition to the environment, food and water security, medicine, cybersecurity, and more. A few of the cooperative ventures between the governments, however, such as a joint investment fund announced in March 2021, are delayed.

Challenges to Normalization

In the time that has passed since the agreements were signed, key issues have had an impact upon the pace and depth of development of Israel's relations with the Abraham Accords states and other countries that are sitting on the fence:

- a. **United States policy:** The Trump administration was the driving force behind the Abraham Accords, grounded in national security considerations that are based on the shared Iranian threat to the United States, Israel, and the Gulf states, and economic considerations. The preeminent interest of the four countries was their relations with the United States and the rewards they received from the Trump administration. While overall the Biden administration has rejected Trump policy, it has endorsed normalization between Israel and Arab countries. At the same time, it has thus far refrained from offering rewards to Arab countries willing to formalize their relations with Israel, and is unwilling to ignore questions of human and civil rights, for example in the case of Saudi Arabia. It was even reported that the current administration [froze](#) activity of the Abraham Fund, which was founded to promote economic cooperation between Israel and its Arab partners in the Abraham Accords.
- b. **The Palestinian issue:** The Palestinian camp (all factions and movements) is unwilling to accept Arab-Israeli normalization before the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is settled. The Palestinian Authority has refused to take part in regional economic and energy initiatives based on the Abraham Accords, and rejected proposals that UAE join the East Mediterranean Gas Forum. An initial significant test of the normalization agreements was Operation

Guardian of the Walls in May 2021. Despite severe criticism of Israel for its extensive use of force against the Palestinians, none of the four countries suspended the agreement and/or the understandings reached, and none spoke against normalization. Nevertheless, when establishing relations with Israel, UAE laid down the principle that spoilers should not be allowed to determine the rules of the game.

- c. **The Iranian issue:** Iran has an interest in driving a wedge between Israel and UAE, Bahrain, and Saudi Arabia - Iran's Gulf neighbors. Israel and the Gulf states are focused on Iran's nuclear program and threats to their territory by Iranian proxies. In contrast to Israel, some Gulf states are also anxious about a direct threat posed by Iranian subversion, particularly among the Shiite population. From Iran's perspective, the unofficial relations between Israel and the Gulf states that existed before the Abraham Accords were aimed at forming an anti-Iran coalition led by the United States, with participation from US allies in the region. Iran also fears a stepped-up intelligence and operational Israeli presence in the Gulf. For their part, the Gulf states feel that the deterrent dimension of cooperation with the United States and Israel has been damaged by the change of administrations in Washington and the current administration's wish to return to the nuclear agreement. They therefore seek to form parallel ties with Iran, and to settle disputes through negotiation. Tehran is demanding that Abu Dhabi and Manama slow the pace of their normalization with Israel and commit to prevent an Israeli military presence in the Gulf.
- d. Like Israel's peace agreements with Egypt and Jordan, the Abraham Accords are more a reflection of Israel's connection with ruling elites in Arab countries, with the public ambivalent about Israel, and sometimes hostile to it. At the same time, this picture is slightly different in the Gulf, where a considerable portion of the citizens ([about 40 percent](#)) support the normalization agreements. Operation Guardian of the Walls did not undermine this support.

Potential for Other Arab Countries to Normalize Relations with Israel

The Abraham Accords can also be viewed as a trial balloon for Arab and Muslim countries sitting on the fence and postponing their decision about whether to join the agreements. If those countries conclude that drawing closer to Israel will help them strengthen their relations with the United States and yield economic benefits and political dividends, they are likely to cross this Rubicon. Beyond the need to expand the existing relations, Israel has an interest in leveraging them for the purpose of extending the circle of peace. UAE and Bahrain also have an interest in expanding the circle of peace with Israel in order to gain Arab and Muslim legitimacy for choosing normalization. Israel should therefore highlight the benefits of peace in furthering highly visible joint civilian projects. This alone, however, is insufficient, because a

key element that facilitated the Abraham Accords was benefits from the US, which are also essential for deepening and expanding the agreements.

One of the important countries in the context of expanding the agreements is Saudi Arabia. Official relations between Saudi Arabia and Israel would also likely give a Muslim religious stamp of approval for relations with Israel, thereby making it easier for Arab and Muslim countries to join the process. A possible future agreement with Saudi Arabia, therefore, has importance beyond its regional weight. It was reported, however, that the Saudi leadership is divided on the connection between normalization with Israel and the Palestinian question – whether progress in the Israeli-Palestinian political process should be a condition for normalization with Israel. Furthermore, the Saudi royal house is committed to the Arab Peace Initiative. As long as Israel does not recognize the principles in the initiative for a final status agreement, Saudi Arabia will not establish official relations with Israel.

Summary and Recommendations

The Abraham Accords represent a substantial achievement for Israel. At the same time, the potential for improving both Israel's strategic position and its response to the challenges it **faces** has not been fully realized. The shared regional threat from Iran was, and remains, the primary motive for normalization of relations. This drive has lost momentum, however, with the change in United States policy under the Biden administration and the significant drop in American willingness to provide security and economic rewards to the countries that signed the Abraham Accords. In any case, creating **a wide range of countries that cooperate toward regional stability** aimed at thwarting Iran's influence in the Middle East is still a key goal.

There are a number of obstacles that make it difficult for countries in the region to join and deepen the Abraham Accords: (1) The most prominent of these is the policy of the Biden administration, which seeks to reduce the presence of American forces in the Middle East and discounts the military option against Iran. This policy has generated much concern among the Gulf countries, which fear that the United States will not provide them a defensive umbrella against Iran. (2) Agreement (if reached) between the United States and the other major powers and Iran on a return to the nuclear agreement – the JCPOA – will enable Iran to increase its negative influence and subversion in the region – a development that will deter Arab countries from confronting Iran directly, and is likely to lead them to lower the profile of their relations with Israel. (3) The weakness of the Palestinian system and Lebanon's unraveling pose risks: Arab countries will find it difficult to make progress in normalization agreements with Israel at a time of escalation and military conflict between Israel and the Palestinians, and between Israel and Lebanon. (4) Another factor liable to delay progress in ties with Israel is the use of rogue actors – proxies – primarily by Iran, to disrupt marine routes, ports, strategic facilities, and daily life in

the countries that have signed the Abraham Accords. (5) Additional room for action by opponents of normalization is a boycott against countries trading with Israel and an appeal to Arab popular opinion that takes advantage of the wide gap between the views of the Arab leadership and the mood and attitudes toward Israel in Arab-Muslim popular opinion.

For these reasons:

- a. Israel should accelerate the cooperation agreements in order to highlight the benefits of peace by removing bureaucratic obstacles that delay implementation of agreements, and by recruiting business concerns and external partners for investment in infrastructure initiatives that contribute to prosperity. At the same time, Israel should mitigate the impression that the agreements are designed above all to provide it with a forward platform for operations against Iran.
- b. Israel needs to induce the Biden administration to promote the Abraham Accords, given the anxiety in the Gulf states about an American abandonment of the region. Arab countries regard Israel as wielding significant influence in Washington and being able to represent their views. The main argument for persuading the administration is the new connection linking Washington's allies in the region, which contributes to reinforcing regional stability, creates a counterforce against parties perpetuating conflicts, and provides the United States with flexibility in handling regional and global problems simultaneously. It is possible, however, that this argument will not suffice, and that the Biden administration will demand in return that Israel refrain from measures that complicate implementation of the two-state solution in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict arena.
- c. In light of the threat of missiles and attack UAVs by Iran and its proxies in the region, Israel can offer the Gulf countries a regional air defense system. Today, the deterrent balance between the Gulf countries and Iran is tilted in Iran's favor, and for this reason the Gulf states do not dare to confront Iran directly (despite the advanced weaponry in their arsenal). An effective defense system will strengthen their sense of security in coping with the challenges posed by Iran in the region.

Israel should demonstrate willingness to include the Abraham Accords countries in initiatives aimed at settling the conflict with the Palestinians – despite the poor chances of achieving an arrangement, because of the Palestinian boycott of the Abraham Accords and the reluctance of Arab countries to approach the quagmire, which appears far from any practical solution. Israel should include UAE in any arrangement with the Gaza Strip and its reconstruction under Egyptian sponsorship, as Abu Dhabi regards Egypt as a key element toward formation of a regional security network.

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