



GNSI DECISION BRIEF

The Future of the Abraham Accords

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Introduction

In 2020, the United States facilitated a series of landmark accords between Israel, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Morocco, Bahrain, and Sudan, marking a historic shift in Middle Eastern and North African geopolitics.^[i] The first milestone occurred in August 2020, when the UAE and Israel announced the normalization of relations, followed by an official signing ceremony at the White House. This was quickly followed by similar agreements between Israel and Bahrain, Morocco, and Sudan. The Abraham Accords included the exchange of ambassadors, the opening of embassies, and collaboration across various economic and security sectors, symbolizing a strategic realignment in regional relationships. These accords paved the way for enhanced economic, cultural, and strategic partnerships.

Background

The announcement of diplomatic ties between the UAE, Bahrain, Morocco, and Sudan with Israel elicited mixed reactions globally. Leaders within the region welcomed the potential for increased engagement, others viewed it as a betrayal, arguing it undermined an Arab consensus for resolving the Palestinian conflict.^[ii] Critics of the agreements also voiced concerns about the continued marginalization of the Palestinian cause and its potential impact on the broader Middle East peace process by fragmenting the Arab bloc and delaying a resolution on the core issue. Palestinian leaders and citizens feared that the normalization of economic deals might lessen international pressure on Israel to address longstanding grievances.^[iii] Beyond the Middle East, the agreements sparked diverse responses: some nations saw them as a step toward stability and economic cooperation, while others remained cautious, insisting on the resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict before fully embracing normalization.

The normalization of relations between Israel and these states represented a clear diplomatic victory for Israel, by which their existence was fully recognized. The accords, however, remain unpopular within many Arab societies, where the idea of peace with the Jewish state is still widely rejected. The social and cultural dimensions of the accords have been challenging, with deep-seated opposition and skepticism persisting among the broader populations of these countries.^[iv]

Regional Impact

The normalization agreements set a pathway for robust economic and technological cooperation between Israel and the signatories. Each country represented by the accords explored opportunities for trade, investment, and joint ventures in areas such as technology, food security, healthcare, and renewable energy.^[v] These cooperative agreements sought to leverage the strengths of each nation to foster economic growth and development. The

normalization agreements paved the way for future security collaborations and reflected a strategic alignment based on shared concerns and interests in addressing common threats in the Middle East. The Abraham Accords provided Israel with a strategic means to counter Iran's growing influence.^[ix] Over the last several decades, Iran has been a vocal critic of Israel, supporting various anti-Israel groups including Hamas in the Gaza Strip and Hezbollah in Lebanon. Iran's persistent calls for Israel's destruction and its backing of anti-Israel groups have heightened concerns over its pursuit of nuclear weapons, which would pose a significant threat to Israel's security. While Israel views Iran as a major threat, its normalization of relations with several Arab states helped to isolate Iran and curb its influence in the region. Bahrain and the UAE especially benefit from the accords by strengthening their security and counterbalancing Iran's regional ambitions. Sudan saw the accords as a means to court U.S. allies, be removed from the list of state-sponsors of terror and shift away from Iranian influence.^[x] Meanwhile, Morocco used the accords as means to offset Algeria's growing relationship with Russia and China and gain recognition for its sovereignty in Western Sahara.^[xi]

All five of the Abraham Accords signatories have benefited economically, with trade volume increasing nearly 600% in the first year.^[xii] According to the same economic data, over a quarter million Israelis visited the UAE in 2022, and nearly another quarter million visited Morocco and Bahrain the same year. From an economic standpoint, the UAE benefitted the most, with estimations of up to \$10 billion in bilateral trade by 2028.^[xiii] Meanwhile, the Israeli state worked to strengthen economic ties with the other signatories in fields such as technology and medical collaboration.^[xiv]

Stress Testing the Accords

A major stress test to the accords came on October 7, 2023, when Hamas militants led a massive surprise attack against Israel. Following the attack, the Israeli government declared war for the first time since 1973.^[xv] The Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) have conducted months-long aerial bombardments of the Gaza Strip as well as a ground assault into the Hamas-controlled territory. The war also stymied electricity, food, and fuel supplies into Gaza and displaced over 1.9 million Gazans from their homes. In January 2024, the UN stated that the situation in Gaza constitutes a major humanitarian crisis.^[xvi]

Since the outbreak of the Israel-Hamas war, none of the signatories to the Abraham Accords have officially renounced the normalization process, however Bahrain suspended ties with Israel by recalling its ambassador and discontinuing economic ties.^[xvii] Israel also evacuated its staff from its Moroccan embassy, ceasing

its diplomatic foothold in west Africa. Meanwhile, Sudan renewed its ties with Iran vis-à-vis the UAE, and the Sudanese Armed Forces appear to have acquired Iranian attack drones and anti-tank guided missile systems to aid in their fight against rebel forces.^[xv]

The lack of a comprehensive peace agreement with Israel has led to a fragmented and divided Palestinian territory, with the West Bank governed by the relatively secular Fatah-led Palestinian Authority (PA) and the Gaza Strip controlled by the fundamentalist Hamas organization. International recognition of a sovereign Palestinian state is uneven, with some countries and organizations formally recognizing it, while others are withholding recognition pending a negotiated resolution with Israel. Meanwhile, negotiators on both sides of the current Israel-Hamas war continue to undermine efforts for a viable ceasefire, with major disagreements regarding the return of hostages, post-war governance, borders, and security.

A Way Forward

In 1979 Israel signed a peace agreement with Egypt and normalized relations with Jordan in 1994. Despite decades of challenges, the two accords have endured. Similarly, it is likely that the signatories of the Abraham Accords will continue participating if the benefits outweigh the liabilities. This is particularly true for Israel, which achieved a clear diplomatic victory, along with significant economic and security gains. However, maintaining the peace agreements poses a greater challenge to the Arab states, especially given the ongoing conflict between Israel and Hamas, the suffering of Palestinians in the Gaza Strip, and escalating tensions between the IDF and Lebanese Hezbollah. Adding to the difficulty is Iran's persistent anti-Israel and anti-American rhetoric, which continues to shape public opinion across the Arab world. The current conflicts are serving as a critical stress test for the resilience of the accords. While the Abraham Accords represent a major step forward in terms of regional diplomacy, there are still many challenges to achieving lasting peace in the region. The road ahead will require a sustained commitment by the Americans, not only in helping maintain the existing agreements but also to address the unresolved issues that continue to fuel tensions. Integrating Palestinian aspirations into the broader peace process, engaging Saudi Arabia, highlighting economic prosperity, and managing geopolitical rivalries is crucial for the durability of the accords.

Decision Points

- **How does the U.S. maintain credibility when advocating the value for the Abraham Accords?**

Given the severity the ongoing crises it will be increasingly difficult for any other Middle Eastern country to convince their body politic that an accord with Israel is a viable political option. Moreover, if the Arab countries of the Middle East and North Africa do not see a clear benefit from the accords, they may be deterred from participating in similar diplomatic initiatives with the Americans guiding the process. Given this certainty, it is important for U.S. policymakers to reinforce their commitment to regional stability and regularly emphasize the value in maintaining the accords and their peace dividends through public statements, official reports, and signal-

ing sustained diplomatic engagement. This can also include fostering new economic partnerships, trade agreements, and joint ventures between the signatories.

- **What tactics should the U.S. take to mitigate tension with Iran while preserving the framework of the accords?**

With the growing risk of a broader regional conflict, U.S. policymakers must plan for contingencies that might arise, such as direct Iranian involvement or widespread internal civil unrest. Decisions for mitigating these risks while preserving the accords' framework will be crucial. For instance, if Iran or one of its proxies chooses to retaliate in a state that is a signatory to the Abraham Accords, the U.S. must be prepared to advocate for the long-term viability of the normalization process despite interim setbacks with Iran. Moreover, Iran's renewed foothold in Sudan gives them almost full control of the corridor into the Red Sea and could make the Horn of Africa a renewed nexus of terrorist operations. This threat necessitates the urgent attention of military strategists, intelligence agencies, and policymakers to effectively counter and manage the escalating risk of a conflict in this region.

- **What does engagement with Saudi Arabia look like for U.S. policymakers?**

Although not a signatory of the accords, Saudi Arabia is one of the linchpins for peace in the Middle East. Yet, any future accord between Israel and Saudi Arabia will be predicated on addressing Palestinian concerns and integrating them into a framework for regional peace efforts. U.S. and Israeli policymakers must recognize this inevitability and work proactively to craft solutions that not only bring Israel and Saudi Arabia closer but also ensure that any plan for Palestine includes their engagement and approval. While it will require a delicate balance of diplomacy and innovative statecraft, this engagement could include more people-to-people exchanges through educational institutions, exchange programs, and collaborative projects.

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