



IN-DEPTH

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# The Abraham Accords: Iceberg Surfacing for Peace & Security in the Middle East

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## Abstract

The Abraham Accords were a formal manifestation of the true underlying reality in the Middle East, which until their signature was poorly represented by explicit diplomacy and declaration. Their main importance is recognizing Israel's natural and self-evident role in the region, expanding the economic relations with it, and shedding light on the non-public security relations already in place, augmented by Israel's move to US CENTCOM. Expectations that the Accords will translate into solid and formal security alliances are exaggerated and surely premature, yet much has been achieved on bilateral levels and with low profile, and much more can be attained. The keys to tapping the new potentials in the Middle East are a long-term Western commitment to regional partnerships, between regional and international partners and among themselves, adaptation of ways and means to current global challenges, including climate change and great power competition and supporting the growth of partners' capabilities in accordance with their unique position and nature.

## Background

On 13 August 2020, US President Trump, Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu and UAE Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Zaid issued a joint declaration about the Abraham Accords, normalizing relations between Israel and several regional countries.<sup>1</sup> In the following months, four Arab states established formal relations with the State of Israel, the first widening of the regional peace

architecture since Egypt and Jordan signed their treaties of peace in 1979 and 1994, respectively.

The signatories of the Abraham Accords, the US, Israel, the UAE, Bahrain, Morocco and Sudan thus showed that the agreements better serve their national interests than adhering to the historical dogma, maintaining that normalizing relations with Israel should only follow the resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

The Accords were achieved after several historic and strategic trends had converged in the changing Middle East: a decade of regional turmoil ("Arab Spring") sharpened domestic challenges and gave rise to Islamist threats and upheaval, as well as Jihadi terror, such as ISIS; Iran evidently became a main source of national and regional security threats to most Middle Eastern countries; the US was perceived as "leaving" the region, fatigued by long conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq and amid its growing rivalry with China and later farther distracted by Russia's war on Ukraine; Palestinian intransigence has eroded support for the Palestinian cause among Arab leaders, no longer willing to put the latter first at the expense of their own national interests; Israel is increasingly being recognized as a potential partner rather than an enemy, with its various resources answering regional needs; and finally, the Trump administration was willing both to suggest a new alternative strategic approach to the old paradigm ("Palestinians first, normalization later") and to propose US benefits as part of the deal, such as F-35s for the UAE, recognition of Western Sahara as part of Morocco, and delisting Sudan as a supporter of terrorism. President Biden's mid-July visit to Israel and to Saudi Arabia continued this strategic vector, emphasizing Washington's effort to advance closer integration of the regional network, including Israel, seeking both to address regional challenges and to offset other powers' influence, especially

<sup>1</sup> U.S. Department of State. "The Abraham Accords." August 13, 2020. <https://www.state.gov/the-abraham-accords/>



China and Russia, in the region.<sup>2</sup>

A view across the Gulf shows various approaches to relations with Israel on civilian issues: from the UAE, Bahrain and Morocco exchanging embassies with Israel, to Qatar's activity with Israel short of diplomatic relations and Saudi Arabia opening its airspace to Israeli flights yet holding fuller relations till better conditions unfold.<sup>3</sup> This variety in approaches is relevant to both civilian affairs and security relations, where low and high-profile activities take place according to the partners' sensitivities and policy preferences.

While most of the new relations are about the economy, tourism, people-to-people relations and diplomacy, much has been written and said about the security and defence aspects of the Accords, from describing them as a "bloc" against Iran, through discussion of a Middle East Air Defense (MEAD) Alliance and Middle East Security Alliance (MESA) and even a "Middle East NATO". Israel's move from EUCOM to CENTCOM under the updated Unified Command Plan (UCP) of the United States was another step towards stronger defence cooperation among America's partners and allies in the region.<sup>4</sup>

## The Abraham Accords: Assessing the Security Dimension

Against the multiple expectations for improved security and defence arrangements following the Abraham Accords, a reality check is needed,

answering some of the following questions: how realistic are the expectations? How far can these cooperation vectors go, and under which frameworks? What are the supporting factors and what are the obstacles and impediments to their advancement? What does this mean for regional security, for the Western role in it and for the strategic competition among the great powers, regionally and globally?

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It may be important to begin by acknowledging that security cooperation between Israel and regional countries has long preceded the formal Accords. Intelligence relations have historically served as low-profile but high-benefit channel for cooperation, away from the public limelight, followed by defence and military contacts and sales. The main drivers for security relations, among the geo-strategic aspects described above, were shared concerns about Iran's multiple threats, growing demand for defence capabilities that Israel masters, and sufficient trust built by years of quiet exchanges.

Yet these complementing elements fall short of the various "alliances" envisioned since the Accords, due to several strategic factors.<sup>5</sup> Politically, the Gulf States vary on interests, agendas and priorities in general, and tensions between them run deep, as could be seen in the yearslong crisis be-

2 Biden, Joe. "Joe Biden: Why I'm going to Saudi Arabia." *The Washington Post*. July 9, 2022. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2022/07/09/joe-biden-saudi-arabia-israel-visit/>

3 Ben-Shabbat, Meir and Aaronson, David. "The Abraham Accords, Two Years On: Impressive Progress, Multiple Challenges, and Promising Potential." *INSS*. August 15, 2022. <https://www.inss.org.il/publication/abraham-accords-two-years/>

4 Orion, Assaf and Dekel, Udi. "Winds of Change: Israel Joins the US Central Command Area." *INSS*. January 20, 2021. <https://www.inss.org.il/publication/centcom/>

5 Abu-Ghazleh, Muhammad. "A Middle Eastern NATO Appears Necessary, but Not Yet Possible." *The Washington Institute*. July 18, 2022. <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/middle-eastern-nato-appears-necessary-not-yet-possible-0>





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tween KSA, UAE, Bahrain and Qatar. Strategically, their perception of Iran's threat differs – among themselves and compared to Israel, as do their appetite for risk and their national capabilities and strategic cultures. The willingness of these parties to fight for each other is doubtful or limited. The war in Yemen exposed the limits of cooperation even among Arab coalition members, as the UAE gradually left the fighting, leaving its Saudi partners alone against the Houthis and their Iranian backers. The F-35 deal, which may have been cancelled by the UAE, reflected the Gulf States' position between the great powers, and their reluctance to ditch their economic relations (alongside 5G communications and arms acquisition) with China to allow advanced US defence systems security.

## The Current State of Play

Reportedly, since the Abraham Accords and Israel's move to CENTCOM, several naval exercises were held in the Red Sea<sup>6</sup>, and an Israeli Navy officer is positioned in Manama, Bahrain, as a liaison to NAVCENT but probably also to the Bahraini hosts. In 2021 Iranian drones were shot down on their way to Israel – two in neighbouring coun-

6 NAVCENT Public Affairs. "U.S., Israel Begin Maritime Exercise in Red Sea ." *U.S. Central Command*. August 1, 2022. <https://www.centcom.mil/MEDIA/NEWS-ARTICLES/News-Article-View/Article/3113137/us-israel-begin-maritime-exercise-in-red-sea/>

tries by IAF F-35s<sup>7</sup> and in 2022 two over Iraq by USAF jets<sup>8</sup>, reflecting already active and effective regional security arrangements. Following the Houthi drone attack on the UAE, Emirati cargo planes were reported in Israel, probably as part of relevant air defence systems transfers.<sup>9</sup> The Israel Defense Forces' Chief of the General Staff had been hosted by Chairman Dunford in a chiefs of defence meeting before the Accords, but now these meetings are easier for the Arab partners to attend. A regional Chiefs of Defense meeting was held in June in Sharm El-Sheikh, Egypt<sup>10</sup> and another took place in Israel in mid-September.

Architecture also matters. Experience shows that the wider the participation, the shallower the cooperation and slower the progress, as parties hesitate to be exposed before their neighbours, managing the risk through need-to-know partnership and deniability. Bilateral ties are the most conducive to intimate exchanges and cooperation, and the addition of even a close third partner is not always for the best. On the other hand, multi-lateral fora sometimes allow actors to mitigate public exposure by joining a larger group, enjoying the legitimacy of larger numbers.

7 Fabian, Emanuel. "The Times of Israel." *IDF says its F-35 jets intercepted 2 Iranian drones ferrying arms to Gaza last year*. March 6, 2022. <https://www.timesofisrael.com/idf-says-f-35-jets-intercepted-iranian-drones-destined-for-gaza-last-year/>

8 Kubovich, Yaniv. "Iranian Drones Downed Over Iraq Were en Route to Strike Israeli Targets, Officials Believe." *Haaretz*. March 21, 2022. <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/2022-03-21/ty-article/premium/officials-iranian-drones-downed-over-iraq-were-headed-to-strike-israeli-targets/00000180-5bc7-dee0-afd6-7bdfb130000>

9 Ahronheim, Anna. "Eight heavy transport aircraft belonging to UAE landed in Israel in past two weeks." *The Jerusalem Post*. April 30, 2022. <https://www.jpost.com/israel-news/article-705478>

10 Gordon, Michael R. and Cloud, David S. "U.S. Held Secret Meeting With Israeli, Arab Military Chiefs to Counter Iran Air Threat." *The Wall Street Journal*. June 26, 2022. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/u-s-held-secret-meeting-with-israeli-arab-military-chiefs-to-counter-iran-air-threat-11656235802>



## The Path Forward: Policy Recommendations

Strategically, while the US focus remains on China and Russia as the main challenges, the Middle East is still a vital region for global security and a theatre for competition between great powers. The US would do well to re-posture its military presence in the region, allowing it to pursue its interests in it through a different force footprint, lowering cost and risk. Western allies' contributions can be adapted to the new US posture, although they, too, are constrained by great power challenges in Europe and the Indo-Pacific.

To be able to shift some assets elsewhere, building partner capability and capacity is a key factor in potential load-sharing. Not all partners are equal, but many of them enjoy unique advantages. Israel can play a larger role in intelligence support, logistics and even some offensive operations, as in building partner capacity in the region and beyond. In fact, Israel has already been striking ISIS targets in the region, helping its neighbours and saving anti-ISIS coalition efforts. Other partners may be less eager to engage in offensive operations, but their assets can supplement or complement Western in-theatre assets. Western partners can play a larger role in promoting regional partners' national capabilities and cooperation between them.

Iran's ballistic missiles, drones and cruise missiles are an evident threat to many regional actors. Regional air defence as an integrated system is a tall order, due to the technical, security and geographic dimensions of such integration. Yet lower steps of synergy, as mentioned, are already in the works. Intelligence can provide indications for threats and forward and long-range radars can give earlier warning and deeper awareness, with US CENTCOM as the integrating agent in a regional architecture. On air defences, one may envision a gradual growth of regional capabilities

and interconnectivity. US and Israeli systems already protect some partners' skies, as can be inferred from reported THAAD and Spider systems in the Emirates and more can be provided down the road. Deeper into the future, Israel's advances on laser-based air defence systems may be boosted by Gulf funding and US production, augmenting the multi-tier defence architecture already in place. Gulf resources may also fund common ammunition reserves under CENTCOM stewardship, to include precision arms, such as JDAMs and missile interceptors for use in case of emergency.

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Security improvements along the Abraham Accords may seek to widen the regional perspective to include an Indian Ocean element, as can be seen in the political-economic I2U2 Quad between India, Israel, the US and UAE. They can also seek to strengthen the peace architecture in the region, including by integrating the Accords' signatories in peacekeeping and peacemaking efforts. As Israel recently concurred to Saudi control of the Tiran and Sanafir Islets', handed over by Egypt and covered by the Israel-Egypt Peace Treaty, Gulf countries may contribute to the Multinational Force and Observers (MFO) in Sinai, bolstering one of the most successful peacekeeping missions in the world.<sup>11</sup> Additional contributions may seek partners' and signatories' support to further build

11 Assaf. "UAVs and the Abraham Accords: New Horizons for Sinai Peacekeeping." *The Washington Institute*. January 13, 2021. <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/uavs-and-abraham-accords-new-horizons-sinai-peacekeeping>



Palestinian security forces' capability in advancing counter-terrorism, self-governance and improved conditions for resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in the future.

Structurally, with the abovementioned supporting factors and obstacles in mind, it is wiser and more practical to make the main advances on bilateral (Israel-Arab, US-Arab) channels, expanding to tri-lateral when useful, and progressing to multilateral when possible.

## **Conclusion**

The Abraham Accords were a formal manifestation of the true underlying reality in the Middle East, which until then was poorly represented by explicit diplomacy and declaration. Their main importance is by recognizing Israel's self-evident role in the region, expanding economic relations with it, and shedding light on the non-public security relations already in place. Expectations that the Accords will translate into solid and formal security alliances are exaggerated and surely premature, yet much has been achieved on bilateral levels and on low profile, and much more can be done. The key to tapping the new potentials in the Middle East is a long-term Western commitment to regional partnerships, adaptation of ways and means to current global challenges and supporting the growth partners' capabilities in accordance with each of their unique position and nature. Expanding multiple bilateral partnerships to tri-lateral, quad-lateral and multilateral frameworks has the potential to improve regional capabilities to protect against common threats and relieve US forces to face more pressing strategic challenges elsewhere.

## About the Author

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