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Axis of Abraham

Arab-Israeli Normalization Could Remake the Middle East

Michael Singh

On September 15, 2020, then U.S. President Donald Trump brought together an unusual group of Middle Eastern politicians on the South Lawn of the White House: the prime minister of Israel, the foreign minister of the United Arab Emirates, and the foreign minister of Bahrain. The UAE had never formally recognized Israel, and Bahrain had held off on opening an embassy there. In the not-too-distant past, both countries had boycotted Israel. But all three states had come together to move beyond this frosty history by signing the U.S.-brokered Abraham Accords, in which they agreed to establish normal diplomatic relations.

The accords themselves were simple. In the case of the Bahraini-Israeli agreement, normalization required just a single page. Yet the effect was profound. Since Israel was established, almost all Arab states have refused to recognize its existence. But the deal is smashing that embargo and, in doing so, opening up new avenues for cooperation and

heralding a dramatic reordering of the Middle East. The agreement didn't come out of nowhere; an inchoate partnership between Israel and conservative Arab states had existed long before 2020, galvanized by the 2011 Arab uprisings and shared concerns about Iran and the Muslim Brotherhood, among other threats. But the Abraham Accords stand to build powerfully on those relationships, with major economic and geopolitical consequences.

These consequences have the potential to be quite positive for the United States. The signatories are all U.S. partners, and they could together offer something that Washington has long wanted: a bloc of Middle Eastern countries that can safeguard U.S. interests, allowing the United States to step back from the region. But the reality is more complicated. Washington will find that working through partners diminishes its ability to influence the outcome of key regional conflicts, including in Libya, in Yemen, and with Iran—all places where the United States and its allies do not see eye to eye. Washington's friends in the Middle East are also wary of being drawn into its growing competition with China, a country they view more as an opportunity than a threat. They may be wary of hitching themselves too closely to Washington in other areas, as well. One of the trends pushing U.S. partners together is what they see as the decreasing reliability and predictability of the United States.

But it is a mistake to think about the Abraham Accords purely, or even mostly, as an opportunity or a risk for Washington. They have much bigger implications for the Middle East itself.

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The agreement will encourage deeper economic integration in a region of the world that has seen little of that. It will draw investors from outside the Middle East who now see better opportunities, leading to greater growth in the region overall. The deal might expand the number of Muslim-majority countries outside the Middle East that are willing to work with Israel. Indeed, it has already done so: Morocco and Sudan concluded normalization agreements with Israel not long after the Abraham Accords were signed. And the deal will open the door to a level of political and security cooperation between Israel and Arab states previously deemed unthinkable, potentially giving rise to a coalition that can help quell regional disputes or deter states such as Iran without the support of outside intervention.

COME TOGETHER


In Western capitals, the Abraham Accords tend to be seen as the next step in the decades-long process of Middle East peacemaking. The signing ceremony recalled similar scenes in 1978 and 1994, with images of regional leaders and the U.S. president seated at a table at the White House. The 1978 ceremony, held to sign the Camp David accords, helped establish peace between Egypt and Israel and return the Sinai Peninsula to Egyptian control. The 1994 gathering was for the Israeli-Jordanian peace agreement, which settled disputes over territory between the two states and formally ended their war.

Both deals dramatically narrowed the scope of the Arab-Israeli conflict, but they produced at best a cold peace. The Abraham Accords, on the other hand, could build a deeper strategic partner-

ship. Its parties struck deals not simply to end disputes but because the region's overall politics have pushed them closer together. The Arab uprisings that began in late 2010, which threw the traditional heavyweights Egypt and Syria into turmoil, helped shift the region's center of gravity to the Arab Gulf states, emboldening them to embark on major regional initiatives without deference to Cairo or Damascus. The uprisings also indicated that U.S.-allied Arab governments faced a variety of threats, including the growing power of the Muslim Brotherhood and other Islamist groups, internal instability requiring economic and political transformation, and Iran, which seeks to use the region's turmoil for its own advantage. Finally, the United States' "pivot to Asia" left these allies feeling increasingly alone and anxious.

Many began searching for new partners, and they quickly found that Israel, with its powerful military and robust economy, could be a valuable friend. The UAE's recent trajectory is illustrative. The country was once affectionately dubbed "Little Sparta" by U.S. officials for its willingness and ability to collaborate with Washington on security matters. But faced with less U.S. involvement and new pressures, it decided that it wanted to be seen as what Emirati officials term "Little Singapore": a state not only able to leverage its wealth and openness to lure international investors but also capable of being a bridge for external powers to its region. Led by the ambitious Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed, the UAE eventually scaled back its involvement in Yemen substantially—escaping, to a significant degree, international opprobrium. It also sought de-escalation with

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its regional rivals: Iran, Qatar, and Turkey. Viewed in this context, normalization with Israel was not a shocking, isolated development but the centerpiece of the country's pivot, a straightforward way for the UAE to protect itself and prosper amid greater geopolitical uncertainty.

Israel and the UAE have anchored their partnership in economic cooperation, and they've done so with substantial success. Israeli-Emirati bilateral trade exceeded \$1 billion in 2021, up from \$180 million in 2020, thanks to increased activity in the diamond, industrial goods, tourism, and services sectors. They are aiming to conclude a free-trade agreement this year, which the RAND Corporation estimates would add 0.8 percent to the UAE's GDP over the next decade. RAND projects that bilateral free-trade agreements with Bahrain, Morocco, Sudan, and the UAE would increase Israel's GDP by 2.3 percent over the same time period. Israel and the UAE also signed a bilateral investment treaty in late 2020, the former's first with an Arab state.

But the real economic promise of the accords lies in their potential to spark broader regional economic integration. The Middle East has long lagged behind almost every other region in the world on this measure. In Europe, for example, nearly 66 percent of trade takes place among European countries; in the Middle East, that figure is less than 13 percent. According to RAND, a plurilateral free-trade agreement among just Bahrain, Israel, Morocco, Sudan, and the UAE would raise the GDP of each by an estimated two to three percent and also spur gains in employment. This would not solve all of the region's

economic woes, but it would be a significant step toward addressing the many issues, including high unemployment and private-sector underinvestment, that contribute to the Middle East's instability.

Economic growth is not the only possible upside of the pact. Israel and the UAE have differing military priorities, in part because the UAE does not wish to provoke Iran or portray its new partnership with Israel as targeted at regional adversaries. But Israel and the UAE do share an interest in deterring Tehran and countering regional terrorist groups, and they are taking initial steps toward open security cooperation. In October 2021, for the first time, the chief of the UAE's air force attended Israel's multilateral "Blue Flag" drill as an observer. Israel offered to provide Abu Dhabi with "security and military" assistance after a Houthi militia attacked the capital in January 2022. The accords could deepen this relationship. Shortly after the deal was signed, Israel was added to the responsibilities of U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM), which has led to breakthroughs that would once have seemed highly improbable. Israel, for instance, was included in a November 2021 CENTCOM exercise that also included the Bahraini and UAE navies. The CENTCOM expansion also means that Israeli and Arab officers will now have the opportunity to build relationships at staff colleges, regional bases, and events run by Washington.

The biggest uncertainty about the Abraham Accords is what they will mean for diplomacy. Israel and the other signatories are mutually involved in conflicts across the region, but they have refrained from staking out common

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positions. Bahrain recently voted at the UN Human Rights Council to establish an open-ended investigation into Israeli actions in Gaza, as did Sudan. Israel and the UAE have a better rapport; both states have been effusive about the agreement and have engaged in a flurry of high-level reciprocal visits since its signing. But perhaps because the UAE values the idea of Arab unity or because it simply wants to avoid embroiling its new partnership in controversy, Israeli-Emirati statements have generally steered clear of the region's political disputes.

This underscores one of the accords' principal limits. As long as other Arab states do not recognize Israel, political coordination between Israel and the other signatories is likely to remain ad hoc, and the diplomatic potential of the accords, underdeveloped. This means that the Middle East will continue to lack any true multilateral mechanism to handle key regional disputes, even though it sorely needs one.

RIPPLE EFFECT

Prior to 2011, the prevailing order in the Middle East was a hub-and-spoke system with the United States at its center. Major regional countries, such as Egypt, Israel, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey, enjoyed extensive cooperation with Washington but little with one another. This was often true even of states that were formally allied. For example, in the early years of this century, U.S. President George W. Bush struggled in his attempt to establish a Gulf security dialogue because the Gulf Arab states were reluctant to engage with the United States in a multilateral format for fear of diluting the special relationships they enjoyed with Washington.

This system, however, collapsed in the aftermath of the Iraq war and the Arab Spring. The former ultimately contributed to acute fatigue with the Middle East among Americans, and the latter swept aside several long-standing U.S. partners. The region is now dominated by a few ad hoc blocs of states: the Iranian-led "axis of resistance," which includes Lebanon, Syria, and various Iranian proxy groups in Iraq and Yemen; an Islamist bloc containing Qatar and Turkey; and a U.S.-leaning bloc composed of Egypt, Israel, Jordan, and many of the Gulf Arab states.

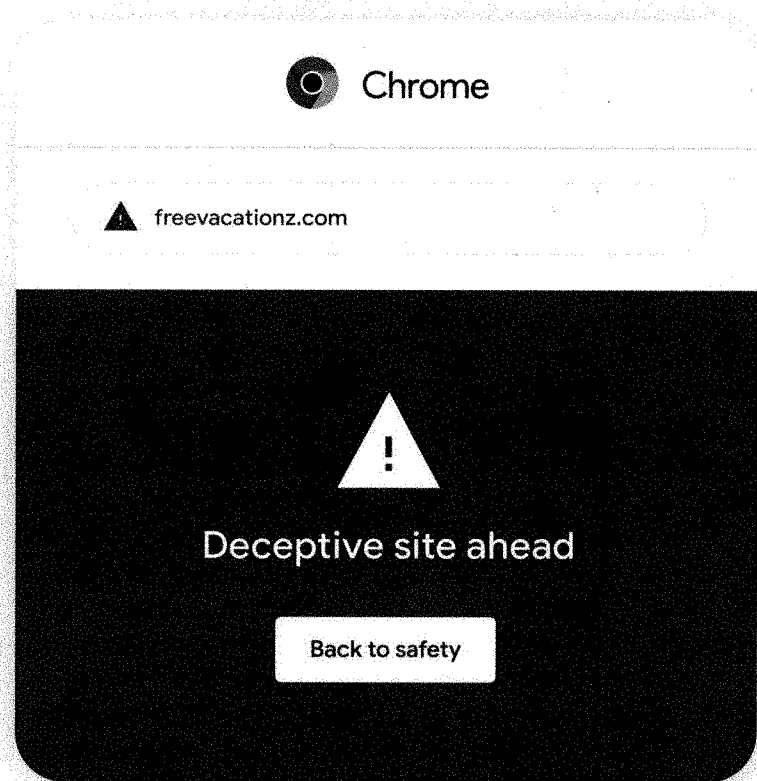
The Abraham Accords were the first attempt to formalize one of these coalitions, and that effort raised the question of whether other U.S.-leaning states might join, as Morocco already has. Certain U.S. partners, such as Iraq and Oman, are unlikely candidates; those two states go to great lengths to balance their ties with Tehran and Washington. Qatar has hosted an Israeli trade office in Doha for years, yet it is also likely to shy away from normalization of relations with Israel for fear of offending Israel's regional adversaries.

But there are other potential signatories, such as Comoros, Mauritania, and Saudi Arabia. For Israel, this last country would be the brass ring. Saudi Arabia is both a leader in the Islamic world and a far larger player than the UAE in the global economy. Normalizing relations with Saudi Arabia would substantially bolster Israel's prestige among countries traditionally wary of Israel, further its growth, and possibly open up new avenues for military cooperation.

Israel and Saudi Arabia have grown more friendly in recent years, and both already quietly coordinate on certain


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security issues. But the obstacles to normalization are still formidable. Riyadh would have to implicitly abandon or modify the late King Abdullah's Arab Peace Initiative, which set Israeli-Palestinian peace as a precondition for broader Arab normalization, and overcome the skepticism of a population much larger and perhaps less moderate than that of the UAE. The United States' role in an Israeli-Saudi deal would also be more fraught. In recent years, the U.S. Congress has repeatedly sought to punish Riyadh for its participation in the war in Yemen and for murdering Jamal Khashoggi, a U.S. permanent resident, a *Washington Post* columnist, and a critic of the Saudi government. Washington might decline to offer Riyadh the sort of sweeteners it gave to Abu Dhabi and other signatories of the accords, such as selling F-35 stealth fighters or providing civil nuclear cooperation.

In the longer run, however, normalization with Israel seems to align with Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman's worldview. Prince Mohammed has sought to transform Saudi Arabia's economy, society, and regional role, including by scaling back Riyadh's support for Islamic fundamentalism and reducing the Saudi economy's dependence on hydrocarbon exports. Normalization with Israel would arguably further open up the country and bolster Riyadh's political profile, and it would deny Abu Dhabi, both a partner and a rival of Riyadh, a comparative advantage in the eyes of investors and diplomats.

But even if no additional states join the Abraham Accords, the agreement is bound to have a broader impact on Israel's foreign relations. The accords

may give cover to Muslim-majority states both in the Middle East and farther afield, such as Indonesia, to engage in greater cooperation with Israel, even if they balk at normalizing relations. The accords have already led to more multilateral cooperation between the signatories and Israel's "first generation" peace partners: Egypt and Jordan. In November 2021, for example, Israel, Jordan, and the UAE announced a deal in which the UAE will produce electricity in Jordan and sell it to Israel, which in turn will provide Jordan with desalinated water. Such an exchange between Israel and Jordan would have been possible before the accords, but the UAE's involvement made it more economically and politically attractive.

The Abraham Accords can also expand international engagement with the Middle East. The agreement already helped pave the way for the quadrilateral forum among India, Israel, the UAE, and the United States, announced in October 2021. The forum was started for economic reasons, but it could eventually expand into other areas, such as maritime security. The accords could also make Israel and the UAE the partners of first resort for external states looking to engage with the region. This dynamic, in turn, may entice additional countries to join the agreement for fear of losing out.

To be sure, the Abraham Accords also bring challenges. They could reduce the salience of the Palestinian issue, which has been declining in international importance for decades. The accords are not built on shared political norms or traditions, and so they are unlikely to advance human rights in the Middle East. There is even

a risk that states will hope to use the international praise that comes from normalizing relations with Israel to divert attention from these issues. Yet any downsides of the accords pale in comparison to the advantages they offer the signatories, the wider region, and, indeed, policymakers in Washington.

THE FORCE AWAKENS

In the United States, the Abraham Accords have been celebrated by leaders across the political spectrum, from Trump to U.S. President Joe Biden, and not just because the deal heralds growing Arab-Israeli normalization. Policymakers from both parties believe that the accords could offer Washington a way out of its Middle East conundrum. Although the United States wants to focus less on this region and more on Asia, it retains important interests in the Middle East, including preventing terrorist attacks, stopping Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon, and even competing with China. The easiest way to manage these issues would be to outsource them, and at first blush, the accords appear to present precisely such an opportunity.

But this potential is complicated by the United States' diminished regional standing. The agreement cannot, for instance, improve the damage inflicted by the increasing partisanship in U.S. foreign policy. The U.S.-Saudi relationship, intimate during the Trump administration, has turned frosty under Biden, and Abu Dhabi believes that Washington abruptly turned against the UAE's operations in Yemen for domestic political reasons. The U.S.-Israeli relationship has become increasingly caught up in feuding between Democrats and

Republicans, as some Democrats have become more critical of Israel and as issues involving the country—including Iran and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict—have become more contentious in both Israel and the United States.

More significant, the accords cannot fix the widening strategic divergence between the United States and its regional partners. Unlike during the Cold War and the “war on terror,” Washington's closest Middle Eastern allies do not share its view of global threats today, and they are wary of siding with the United States against its rivals, both because that could cost them economic opportunities and because they are unsure of U.S. trustworthiness.

But the accords can still allow Washington to advance its strategic aims. Deeper regional integration could by itself help the United States, including by crowding out some of the Chinese investment that troubles Washington. After the accords were signed, for example, the Emirati conglomerate DP World entered into a partnership with Israel's Bank Leumi that could allow them to jointly develop Israel's ports. The result was credible competition for Chinese state-owned port developers, something Western states have struggled to produce. The same story could play out across other sectors. Regional joint ventures marrying Israeli technology and Emirati capital, for instance, could more successfully challenge Chinese dominance in the telecommunications and infrastructure sectors than have Western initiatives.

Integration will prove especially effective at curtailing Chinese investment if the accords increase economic engagement between the Middle East

and external powers previously wary of the fraught Arab-Israeli dynamic, such as India, Japan, and the European Union. China will also seek to capitalize on the economic opportunities created by the Abraham Accords. Washington's best chance of countering any inroads that Beijing makes will be to recruit other external powers to invest as a counterweight.

A regional partnership could also help shield individual countries from Chinese leverage. This is not an idle concern. In recent years, Beijing has grown bolder in using its economic power to further its political ends, threatening states ranging from Australia to Lithuania to try to bring them to heel. Although this has yet to happen in the Middle East, the region's countries will need to support one another if it does, and the Abraham Accords could provide an important tool for doing so. The need for economic protection might even motivate the Middle East's smaller or poorer states to join the accords.

The agreement could also strengthen cooperation between the signatories and the U.S. military, even if the deal does not expand to include formal security partnerships with the United States. The signatories already rely on Washington's cooperative military architecture. Israel and the UAE depend heavily on the United States for military equipment, and they participate extensively in CENTCOM exercises and training. Russia and other states could try to sell military systems to the signatories, but for the foreseeable future, no other external power will be able to match the security package offered by Washington. If anything, the Abraham Accords will only strengthen

the United States' advantage by incentivizing more states to link up with Washington: countries looking to join the partnership will gain maximum value only by aligning with the U.S. military system that underpins it.

It will take time for all these benefits to accrue, and Washington will have to be patient. It will also need to put in effort. In the diplomatic and security spheres, the United States will have to continue to act as a convener and sometimes serve as an intermediary. It will need to steadily bolster partners' diplomatic, military, and economic capabilities so that they can achieve critical outcomes without Washington's direct intervention. To expand the alliance, the United States may have to sweeten the deal for interested states by offering incentives for joining, such as stepped-up diplomatic and security cooperation with Washington, preferential trade and tax treatment, or financial assistance for projects conducted between signatories. This illuminates a hard truth for U.S. policymakers: the Abraham Accords may point to a future in which the United States can do less in the Middle East—but to get there, the country must first do more. 🌐