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How the Abraham Accords Look Forward, Not Back

by [David Makovsky](#)

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Brief Analysis

Close reading of Israel's agreements with the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain shows how their strictly bilateral focus could affect the chances for people-to-people engagement and regional security cooperation, depending on each government's political will.

On September 15, President Trump hosted Emirati foreign minister Abdullah bin Zayed, Bahraini foreign minister Abdullatif al-Zayani, and Israeli prime minister Binyamin Netanyahu as they signed historic new normalization agreements on the White House lawn. A preliminary look at the text of these documents—collectively called the Abraham Accords—indicates where they echo and, more important, diverge from Israel's past treaties with Egypt and Jordan.

CONTRASTS WITH PREVIOUS TREATIES

The 1979 Egyptian treaty and 1994 Jordanian treaty focused to varying degrees on completing the unfinished business of armed conflict. In the former case, the scope of restricted military zones in the Sinai Peninsula was critical given that Egypt and Israel had fought wars against each other in 1948, 1956, 1967, and 1973. That last war came just a few short years before Egyptian president Anwar Sadat's [electrifying 1977 visit to Jerusalem](#). Other regional leaders were unable to move past such recent traumas—their opposition to Egypt charting its own course was so great that the Arab League moved its headquarters from Cairo to Tunis and did not return until a decade later. As for the Jordanian treaty, King Hussein and Israeli prime minister Yitzhak Rabin sought to defuse any potential for

renewed conflict through novel territorial solutions (e.g., Israel leasing border land for twenty-five years) and last-minute understandings on water rights. At the time, water issues were an acute source of conflict in the Middle East; they are somewhat less so today given advances in desalination.

In short, both treaties were agreements between governments seeking to close the book on military conflict with Israel, even as the Palestinian issue remained unresolved and normalization between their societies remained uncertain. In contrast, the agreements signed yesterday are largely free of the baggage of the past.

For one thing, the UAE and Bahrain do not border Israel and never fought against it on the battlefield, so there is no sense of public trauma on either side. Although the Gulf states have formally participated in Arab boycotts of Israel since 1948, they have forged semi-covert ties of varying degrees with the Jewish state in recent years. Tellingly, when Palestinian officials urged the Arab League to condemn the new Emirati agreement, the organization instead noted that individual Arab states are entitled to make their own sovereign decisions on such matters—a far cry from its dramatic opposition to the Camp David Accords in 1979.

This week's accords are about charting a new course for the region, one based on closer Arab-Israeli alignment regarding strategic issues and economic opportunities. The agreements also have significant potential to encourage peace between peoples (including tourism, trade, and investment links) rather than just between governments.

NOTEWORTHY TEXTUAL POINTS

What's in a name? The [Emirati-Israeli text](#) is longer than the [Bahraini accord](#) because the two governments had time for a round of bilateral working groups in the weeks leading up to the signing ceremony (they covered issues such as civil aviation and investment, though there are of course more technicalities to iron out in the coming months). Israeli officials wanted the UAE agreement to be called a “treaty of peace” in order to put it on par with previous treaties—they pointed to comparable examples in modern history where countries not in direct conflict characterized their agreements as “peace treaties.” Ultimately, the document was titled “Abraham Accords Peace Agreement: Treaty of Peace, Diplomatic Relations, and Full Normalization Between the United Arab Emirates and the State of Israel.”

In contrast, the Bahraini breakthrough was announced on September 11, just a few days before the ceremony. The resulting document is therefore quite brief: its title is “Abraham Accords: Declaration of Peace, Cooperation, and Constructive Diplomatic and Friendly Relations.”

Israel's place in the region. The UAE agreement includes a passage on how Arabs and Jews “stem from the same ancestor, Abraham” and are both indigenous to the Middle East. Such phrasing is important because it clearly refutes longstanding allegations in the Arab world that Zionism is alien to the region.

Cultural peace. Israeli officials intimately involved in the UAE deal privately say that the Emiratis were emphatic about focusing on interfaith understanding and religious tolerance. As the treaty itself notes, “The Parties undertake to foster mutual understanding, respect, co-existence, and a culture of peace between their societies in the spirit of their common ancestor, Abraham, and the new era of peace and friendly relations ushered in by this Treaty, including by cultivating people-to-people programs, interfaith dialogue, and cultural, academic, youth, scientific, and other exchanges between their peoples.” Indeed, the agreement holds substantial promise precisely because both parties recognize the need to reach out on a societal level, not just a governmental level.

To be sure, Israel's treaties with Egypt and Jordan mentioned many of the same normalization issues laid out in the UAE treaty. Yet these issues were largely relegated to annexes and were never fulfilled in practice. For example, the Jordanian treaty refers to interfaith activity (Article 9.3) and cultural/scientific exchanges (Article 10), but neither has come about in the decades since.

Focus on the bilateral. Bahrain, Israel, and the UAE did not want to be accused of either trying to negotiate for the Palestinians or usurping Jordan’s role as custodian of the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif in Jerusalem. Therefore, the accords do not call for any changes in access to that city’s holy sites. Instead, their focus is strictly on bilateral issues such as aviation, trade, and taxation. The Emirati treaty could also serve as a template for fuller Israeli agreements with Bahrain and other potential Arab partners. For now, a third document signed this week—the shorter, more generalized “[Abraham Accords Declaration](#)”—is designed to encourage common regional aspirations for peace, according to officials.

Regional security architecture? The seventh paragraph of the Emirati agreement reads: “The Parties stand ready to join with the United States to develop and launch a ‘Strategic Agenda for the Middle East’ in order to expand regional diplomatic, trade, stability, and other cooperation. They are committed to work together, and with the United States and others, as appropriate, in order to advance the cause of peace, stability, and prosperity in the relations between them and for the Middle East as a whole, including by seeking to advance regional security and stability.”

In theory, the reference to “regional security and stability” could be seen as a rubric for wider security cooperation. Yet the treaty does not call for a mutual defense alliance, so it cannot be reasonably interpreted as pointing at Iran—in fact, Emirati officials wanted to avoid any such impression entirely. Even so, some observers may argue that paragraph 7 will unite those governments in the region who are uncomfortable with political Islam, perhaps encouraging them to form an axis against states who ardently favor it (e.g., Iran, Turkey, Qatar).

CONCLUSION

Ultimately, the test of whether a treaty becomes a dead letter or a source of action is the political resolve of the parties involved. For Israel and the UAE, the rationale behind the accord stems from their strong alignment on two fronts: marginalizing the region’s most destabilizing forces amid concerns about gradual American pullback, and removing barriers between two of the most globalized and technologically focused countries in the Middle East. This same logic led Emirati minister of state Anwar Gargash to publicly state that he foresees a “warm peace,” and Israel is certainly eager to continue dissolving its regional isolation. Yet if either party’s political determination flags for whatever reason, even the best text will be unable to advance their peace any further.

David Makovsky is the Ziegler Distinguished Fellow at The Washington Institute, creator of the podcast [Decision Points](#), and coauthor with Dennis Ross of the book [Be Strong and of Good Courage: How Israel’s Most Important Leaders Shaped Its Destiny](#). ❖



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