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Biden Should Build on the Abraham Accords, Not Roll Them Back

by [Jay Solomon](#)

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Jay Solomon](#)

Jay Solomon is an adjunct fellow at The Washington Institute.



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Party leaders are providing constructive input, but the administration should stop short of any measures that risk sabotaging this moment of historic progress in Arab-Israel relations.

President-elect Joe Biden has agreed with few of President Donald Trump's foreign policy initiatives over the past four years, save for maybe one: The Abraham Accords, the U.S.-brokered peace agreements between Israel and a slew of Arab and Muslim-majority states that have flowered in recent months. Biden has publicly blessed them.

To build on this seismic shift in the Middle East's politics, though, Biden will need to challenge the progressive wing of his Democratic Party that's both critical of the Accords and seeks to push Washington away from its traditional regional allies, in particular, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Israel. In the wake of this month's attack on the U.S. Capitol, anything associated with the Trump administration runs the risk of being tainted.

Leading Democratic voices, both in Congress and the foreign policy establishment, argue the Abraham Accords risk entrenching non-democratic monarchs and strongmen in the region, while further militarizing the Persian Gulf through arms sales. They also say the normalization deals will reduce pressure on Israel to make the territorial concessions needed to forge an independent Palestinian state, long a top U.S. foreign policy objective.

Some Democratic lawmakers, eyeing their control of the White House and Senate in January, are pressing Congress to challenge, if not roll back, the terms of the Abraham Accords. These include the arms deals to the UAE and Bahrain, and the financial aid package promised to Sudan.

“What we risk doing here is fueling an arms race,” Democratic Senator Chris Murphy of Connecticut said in December. “Today we may be selling the F-35s and the MQ-9s to the UAE. But the Saudis are going to want it, the Qataris have already requested it, and it just fuels Iran’s interest in continuing to build up its own military programming.”

Biden shouldn’t discard the constructive input from leaders in his party. But he must use it to build on the Abraham Accords, not roll them back.

The Middle East is moving in directions Washington can shape, but not totally control. The next U.S. administration should use this historic convergence of interests between Israel and the Arab-majority states to help place the region on a much stronger footing and greatly enhance the U.S.’ economic and security interests for the long term.

Economic Integration: A key feature of the Abraham Accords is their focus on integrating Israel into the economies of the broader Middle East, many of which have stagnated due to sectarian conflict and political instability. Israel’s high-tech industry is perfectly positioned to partner with the oil-rich Gulf states to breed investments in clean energy, irrigation and information technologies. This collaboration is designed to help the UAE, Bahrain and Sudan wean off their dependence on fossil fuels, and also promote investments in the region’s less resource-rich countries.

The Biden administration can play a direct role in this economic awakening going forward. The Abraham Accords established a U.S.-backed fund that initially allocates \$3 billion for the financing of regional business projects. This investment can grow over the next four years, and include the participation of American companies, universities and non-governmental organizations.

Middle East Peace: Israel, as part of its normalization agreement with the UAE in September, agreed to suspend its plans to annex parts of the West Bank last year. Many progressive Democrats argued the Abraham Accords rewarded Israel’s Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu for simply pulling back from a step that would have violated international law. The Biden administration can use Israel’s reversal on annexation to try and breathe life back into the Mideast peace process.

The blooming of economic ties between Israel and leading Arab-majority states can show to the Palestinian leadership the benefits of ending conflict and joining regional economic integration. Saudi Arabia, meanwhile, which hasn’t normalized relations with Israel, can use the prospect of this step as leverage to press Israel into moving forward with the creation of an independent Palestinian state. Israel’s leadership knows that its full acceptance into the Middle East can only happen once it formally forges diplomatic ties with Riyadh.

Iran: A key issue driving the Abraham Accords has been Israel and the Arab-majority states’ shared fears of Iran and its regional activities. The agreements formalize what has been years of covert security and intelligence cooperation between the Jewish state and these countries. Israeli drones, surveillance equipment and other high-tech gear are in high demand in Middle Eastern capitals.

President-elect Biden has pledged to return the U.S. to the Obama administration’s nuclear agreement with Iran, and build out broader pacts to constrain Tehran’s missile program and support for Mideast militias and terrorist groups. He should use the growing alliance between Israel and Arab-majority states as leverage to increase pressure on Tehran and highlight its regional isolation. This emerging economic and security bloc could serve as a symbol of the region’s potential if militancy and extremism are replaced by economic integration and dynamism. This new partnership should also play a role in helping the Biden administration shape these proposed new agreements with Iran.

Successive U.S. administrations, for more than 70 years and from both parties, have made the integration of Israel into the broader Middle East a cornerstone of American foreign policy. Now that it's happening, Washington shouldn't be a barrier to its expansion, but seek to underpin it. President-elect Biden has a unique position to shape this new Middle East in a way that best advances U.S. interests.

Jay Solomon is an adjunct fellow with The Washington Institute and a senior director at APCO Worldwide. This article was originally published [on the Newsweek website](#). ❖



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1111 19th Street NW - Suite 500
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