

The Abraham Accords and the Changing Shape of the Middle East

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Articles & Testimony

A veteran U.S. diplomat reflects on the decades of direct engagement that paved the way to the accords, which have since opened a new avenue for curbing Iran and reanimating Israeli-Palestinian progress.

One question I often get is how are the Abraham Accords changing the Middle East? It is a fair and logical question, but there is a more important one to ask: how did the region change so the Abraham Accords became possible? And, what does that change tell us about where the region is headed?

The change did not happen overnight. There are many critics of the Oslo process between Israel and the PLO, but Oslo began to change the context for the Sunni Arab states. If the PLO, the embodiment of the Palestinian national movement, could deal with Israel, it became more acceptable for them to do so as well. True, the Madrid process initiated multilateral working groups a year earlier in 1992, and many Arab states took part in meetings that included Israelis in regional discussions on issues ranging from arms control to environment and water. That surely helped, but Oslo provided an impetus to start quiet exploratory discussions on bilateral, not multilateral, cooperation between Israel and a number of Arab states. As our lead negotiator on the Oslo and Arab-Israeli processes, I set up a number of discreet meetings between Israeli officials and their Gulf state counterparts in the 1990's. Most of the bilateral meetings involved security cooperation and built on intelligence contacts that Mossad had established over time, but the scope of these private discussions clearly expanded.

Security was the basis of these talks. It was a foundational element, and it would become more prominent as the Gulf Arab states saw the threat from Iran grow more urgent. Condoleezza Rice discovered this in 2007, when she decided to launch an ambitious initiative to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Her aim was to present the initiative to the leaders of the Gulf Cooperation Council, fully expecting them to embrace and endorse her effort on the

Palestinian issue. To her surprise, the Saudi, Emirati, Bahraini, Qatari, Kuwaiti, and Omani leaders showed little interest in her initiative and instead made it clear that, in her words, they had three priorities: “Iran, Iran, and Iran” (as described in my 2015 book *Doomed to Succeed: The U.S.-Israel Relationship from Truman to Obama*). Israel shared the same priority, and the reality of a strong converging strategic threat perception fostered deeper security cooperation.

I, too, had an experience early in the Obama Administration that vividly demonstrated the convergence of interests between Israel and a Gulf state counterpart. In February 2009, early in the Obama Administration, I had responsibility in the State Department for helping shape our policy toward Iran. Yousef al-Otaiba—the UAE ambassador to the United States—asked if I could meet him for an informal discussion on our approach to Iran. To make it informal, he asked that we meet neither at the State Department nor at his embassy, preferring to meet at a suite he had at the Ritz Carlton hotel. I agreed and when I knocked on the door, Ambassador Otaiba greeted me with Sallai Meridor standing next to him. Here was the Israeli ambassador to America standing with the Emirati ambassador with the meeting being the message. Without a word, they were conveying that the two of them saw Iran in the same way and the Administration needed to understand that they were working together and we should appreciate the nature of the threat and respond accordingly.

The so-called Arab Spring in 2011, something I prefer to call the Arab Awakening, further altered the landscape and the calculus of many Arab leaders about what was at stake for them in cooperation with Israel. While warfare in Syria and Libya—and the removal of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt—produced upheaval domestically, the “awakening” of Arab populations symbolized a loss of fear. Their frustration with a lack of the delivery of basic goods and services and effective governance helped bring them to the streets to confront different Arab governments. Again, principally in the Gulf, there was a recognition that these governments had to find a way to be more responsive in meeting the economic needs of their people. As an example, in Saudi Arabia, King Abdullah **allocated massive funds** (<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-saudi-king/saudi-king-back-home-orders-37-billion-in-handouts-idUSTRE71M22V20110223>) to provide three-month bonuses and to produce more housing for the Saudi public. That was a near term response, but I also began to hear from different Arab leaders in the Gulf that they would need to deliver more at least economically. Democracy might not be on the table but shaping the ability to deliver more economic goods in the face of new challenges became a necessity. The information revolution put a premium on developing a digitally based economy, with the ability to use big data and innovate. Digitally driven economies meant that cyber security became a critical need. Climate change produced drought and stressed water and food security. (And, later with COVID, health security became a necessity.)

In all these areas, Israel could offer cutting-edge technologies. On water and food security, Israel **leads the world** (<https://www.haaretz.com/science-and-health/2017-07-04/ty-article/how-israel-can-help-a-thirsty-world/0000017f-e095-df7c-a5ff-e2ffb6540000>) in drip irrigation, the use and recycling of waste-water (treating and re-using 90% of it), recapture of rain water, water-gen machines that pull humidity out of the atmosphere and create 1500 liters of drinking water per machine, the development of drought resistant crops, etc. Similarly, on cyber security and defense, Israel is a world leader—with some technologies like Pegasus being sought not just for its use in penetrating terrorist and criminal groups, but, unfortunately, by some states for **domestic control purposes** (<https://www.reuters.com/technology/nso-ended-pegasus-contract-with-uae-over-dubai-leaders-hacking-2021-10-06/>).

Given what Israel could offer, countries like the UAE and Bahrain began to move from discreet to public cooperation, with the Emirates actually inviting Israel to establish a diplomatic presence in 2015 in Abu Dhabi in the office of the International Renewable Energy Agency. Following this, a variety of Israeli delegations (commercial and sport) began to visit the UAE. By 2019, Israel was invited to set up its own pavilion at the Dubai 2020 Expo—something that would

be delayed because of COVID but was offered to Israel well before the breakthrough on normalization would be announced by the Trump Administration in August 2020. Bahrain and Morocco during this period also greatly expanded the invitations to Israeli delegations. While the scope of Israeli cooperation with Saudi Arabia remained largely below the radar screen, it is noteworthy that even before the advent of the Abraham Accords, 500 Israeli companies were doing business throughout the Gulf states, according to comments by a senior Israeli official during a 2019 briefing.

The fundamental point is that Arab leaders increasingly came to view cooperation with Israel as in their interests. It may have begun exclusively in the security domain, with security cooperation becoming even more important as America's Arab partners became increasingly convinced that the US was withdrawing from the region and was inherently less reliable. As Arab officials told me, "Israel, unlike the US, isn't going anywhere"—and, certainly as importantly, "Israel actually acts and doesn't talk about it."

But as much as security concerns cemented a common interest, it is also the economic dimension that has added to Arab interests in their ties to Israel. These security and economic interests are not ephemeral. They also have affected the way the Emiratis, the Bahrainis, and the Saudis have come to see the Palestinians. Their frustration with the Palestinians, especially their leadership, has become commonplace. In my trips to Saudi Arabia and the Emirates, state officials and prominent individuals assert their unwillingness to deny their country what is in its best interests for the sake of the Palestinians. Bandar bin Sultan, the long-time Saudi ambassador, appeared for three nights on the al Arabiya network in August 2020 in a documentary [in which he recited](https://english.alarabiya.net/features/2020/10/05/Full-transcript-Part-one-of-Prince-Bandar-bin-Sultan-s-interview-with-Al-Arabiya)

<https://english.alarabiya.net/features/2020/10/05/Full-transcript-Part-one-of-Prince-Bandar-bin-Sultan-s-interview-with-Al-Arabiya> all the opportunities Palestinian leaders have missed to settle the conflict historically. Bandar said Saudi Arabia was right to support the Palestinian cause but was wrong to cover for all the mistakes Palestinian leaders have made. He emphasized that Palestinian leaders have demonstrated that they are incapable of settling the conflict, and Saudi Arabia can no longer afford to forgo its own interests given the very real challenges and threats it faces in the region.

Does this mean the Palestinian issue has no resonance with Arab publics? The short answer is no. It remains an issue of basic justice in the eyes of many Arabs. Moreover, socialization of hostile attitudes toward Israel over more than 70 years will not simply disappear, especially in Jordan and Egypt, where the general public remains largely hostile toward Israel. In the Gulf, the attitudes are different. The people there are more removed from the conflict, and [polling indicates](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/egyptians-oppose-russias-move-ukraine-yet-half-still-value-ties-moscow) <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/egyptians-oppose-russias-move-ukraine-yet-half-still-value-ties-moscow> that unlike in Egypt and Jordan where roughly 10% favor cooperation with Israel even if there is no peace between Israelis and Palestinians, the number in the Gulf states is around 40% favoring such cooperation. As the benefits from economic cooperation become more visible, one can expect this number to go up.

Of course, Hamas will do all it can to try to provoke violence and an Israeli response in the one area that resonates with all Muslims. Hamas and Iran understand that when Israeli security forces go into al Aqsa mosque on the Haram al Sharif (the Temple Mount), this triggers deep anger throughout Arab countries toward Israel. In April, during Ramadan, when Israeli police went into the mosque to stop those on the inside from continuing to throw stones and to fire off incendiary devices, the imagery of the Israeli police invading the mosque and violating the sanctuary triggered an emotional backlash. The provocation instigated by Hamas and its supporters largely did not register, but the response to it did. All the Abraham Accord countries conveyed demarches to Israel, seeking that Israel stop all such actions and avoid changing the status quo on the Haram. That said, complaints and criticism of Israeli actions were ultimately limited and not sustained.

But there should be no doubt that Hamas and Iran will try to exploit what they see as a vulnerability of those

countries making peace with Israel. If nothing else, they may believe this will keep the Abraham Accord countries—and those like Saudi Arabia that appear on the brink of doing more in public (and in private)—on the defensive. Israel, for its own reasons, has an interest in trying to defuse tensions with the Palestinians and improve the day-to-day realities. Making political progress is desirable, but given the divisions among the Palestinians and the political circumstances in Israel, the prospect of movements toward a political settlement seem distant now. In such circumstances, for Arab states, the answer must be to show that the Abraham Accords are working and the benefits of peacemaking are very clear for all those who are normalizing. The Emirates are already touting that **trade with Israel (<https://apnews.com/article/politics-middle-east-united-arab-emirates-free-trade-a7c97bf7287a91ba38aaefa72d1d9eb2>)** is going to be \$2 billion for this coming year, \$5 billion next year, and will grow dramatically over the coming decade.

There is to be sure a larger point not just about the countries normalizing with Israel but about the region and two distinctly different pathways. While there are gradations in-between, one pathway in the Middle East today joins a number of Sunni Arab governments working with Israel openly and privately; they are dealing not only with common security threats but also are seeking to build resilient, modern economies. (Clearly, the oil rich states have more means to succeed, but they are also actively working to change the character of education and social realities in their countries.) The other pathway is Iran's. Its leaders tout the "axis of resistance." But it is really an axis of misery. Where the Iranians have dominant influence the state is either failed, failing, or paralyzed—simply look at Lebanon, Syria, Yemen, and Iraq for evidence. Iran offers only the perpetuation of conflict—as it needs conflict to justify its brand of militias. It ensures the absence of hope or possibility. Its ideology is one that justifies a hold on power and little else—no wonder that in Iran the only ones who embrace the ideology are those in power.

Certainly, one of the ways to compete with the Iranian axis is both to be able to blunt its threats and highlight the price it imposes on its people everywhere. The Iranian model has few takers and for good reasons. Over time, the Abraham Accord countries will expand and offer hope for a very different Middle East. The Palestinians, too, can profit from their expansion if the Arab states reaching out to Israel also are prepared to ask Israel to take certain steps toward the Palestinians. For example, if the Saudis were prepared to open a commercial, trade office in Tel Aviv, a politically significant move, they could ask Israel to stop building to the east of the security barrier—meaning Israel would build on 8% of the West Bank but not on 92% of the territory. Alternatively, the Palestinians, understanding they are not going to stop the normalizing process, could ask Arab states that are reaching out to Israel to help meet Palestinian practical needs. In this connection, Palestinians have acute water needs, they could ask the Saudis to invest in water infrastructure in the West Bank—something that would require the Saudis to work directly with Israel to be able to do it. It could produce a win-win-win outcome.

The point is that Arab outreach to Israel could actually be helpful either in breaking the stalemate between Israelis and Palestinians or at least ameliorating the conflict and changing its circumstances. In other words, the Abraham Accords and their expansion represent a pathway for a hopeful Middle East whether one is addressing the need to compete with Iran or improve the prospects for Israelis and Palestinians. It is profoundly in America's interest to do all it can to promote the Accords so they both deepen the scope of cooperation among the countries of the region and widen the benefits for those who are now participating in them.

Dennis Ross is the counselor and William Davidson Distinguished Fellow at The Washington Institute. This article was originally published [on the Hoover Institution's Caravan website](https://www.hoover.org/research/abraham-accords-and-changing-shape-middle-east)

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