



## Resilience and Roadblocks

### The Abraham Accords at Five Years

David Makovsky



Next to Prime Minister Netanyahu and President Trump are the foreign ministers of Bahrain and the UAE, Abdullatif bin Rashid al-Zayani and Abdullah bin Zayed al-Nahyan, September 15, 2020.

In 2020, under U.S. auspices, Israel signed the Abraham Accords with the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain, marking a historic expansion of its formal relationships in the Arab world beyond Egypt (1979) and Jordan (1994). A third normalization pact in 2020 with Morocco was regarded as parallel to but separate from the other two agreements, given the special nature of bilateral ties dating back to the Oslo years.<sup>1</sup> A fourth deal with Sudan was never formalized.

The normalization agreements sought to widen the circle of peace in the Middle East and advance a U.S.-endorsed architecture for Israel's regional integration.

Remarkably, the deals have proven both durable and relevant even amid strains centered on Israel's prosecution of the war in Gaza. Five years after the signing of these landmark agreements, the strategic architecture to deepen existing Abraham Accords relationships and welcome new partners remains in place.

To be sure, anger directed at Israel is authentic on both the official and popular levels, and Abraham Accords countries have minimized high-level engagement with Israel during the Gaza war, preferring to keep government relations quiet. The war also halted U.S.-led talks for Israeli normalization with Saudi Arabia. But no signatory to the Accords has removed or suspended its participation. Instead, steady cooperation in areas such as air defense has not only persisted but in some cases deepened.<sup>2</sup> Economic cooperation has also persevered, even if the pace of growth has sometimes slowed.

This sustained cooperation reflects a larger reality in which Israel's post-October 7 military successes have upended the regional balance of power to Iran's detriment. Arab countries see major strategic openings in the decimation of Hezbollah in Lebanon, the fall of the repressive Assad regime in Syria, and direct blows to Iran's air defenses and nuclear infrastructure. They also see an opportunity to

enhance their long-term security in partnership with Israel, which in time should have options for warming ties with countries both inside and outside the region. But Arab countries simultaneously harbor deep concerns about Israel's reliance on military force in the region and want to see a transition to diplomacy and political processes. Israel's campaign in Gaza especially has caused serious alarm, and some worry about a return to war with Iran.

Operationally, deepened security cooperation was aided by Israel's reassignment to U.S. Central Command,<sup>3</sup> which has since emerged as the primary platform for activating an integrated regional air defense architecture.<sup>4</sup> The potential of this concept was realized impressively in response to the Iranian air attack in April 2024, when CENTCOM synchronized a multinational air defense coalition that intercepted most of the attack drones and cruise missiles launched at Israel.<sup>5</sup>

But getting Arab public buy-in for both current and future normalization deals will take substantial effort and, more pointedly, a resolution to the Gaza war. Equally challenging will be channeling resources to stabilize the Middle East during a moment of great dynamism. The United States can be a major player in such an effort, even as it directs its focus to other regions and to challenges at home.

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## Concept and Origins of the Abraham Accords

Before the breakthroughs of 2020, prevailing orthodoxy in the region held that Arab states would not normalize relations with Israel without progress on the Palestinian issue. (Both Egypt and Jordan, the previous states to establish diplomatic relations, had required peace rather than normalization deals because they had fought wars with Israel.<sup>6</sup>) The linkage idea granted Palestinian leaders an effective veto against any peace or normalization deal between Israel and Arab states,<sup>7</sup> which for decades limited their engagement based on fears of popular resistance and rejection of ties absent progress on a Palestinian state. Notably, the Israel-Jordan peace came only after the Oslo breakthrough of 1993, despite many years of unofficial security ties.<sup>8</sup> The Arab Peace Initiative of 2002 reinforced linkage by asserting that normalization would come only after Israel and the Palestinians had reached their own peace agreement.<sup>9</sup>

Israel's lack of past wars with the UAE, Bahrain, or Morocco contributed to a sense that normalization could bring about a peace between peoples, not just governments, characterized by close economic cooperation and associated benefits for both sides. To this day, while Jerusalem's official connections with Cairo and Amman remain strong on matters like intelligence sharing—and have grown in cooperation on water and gas (with Jordan) and gas (with Egypt)—the bilateral relationship is poor in other respects, amounting to a peace between governments rather than peoples.<sup>10</sup>

In the Abraham Accords cases, the promise of economic links with Israel—a standout in fields like cybersecurity and digitization—proved a strong enticement for Arab capitals looking to diversify their economies away from a reliance on hydrocarbons. The principals also played a key role, especially Yousef Al Otaiba, the Emirates' ambassador to the United States.<sup>11</sup>

To be sure, the story was different for each Abraham Accords signatory, and it will be so in the future. But a common thread was the desire to deepen ties to Washington before it turned its attention elsewhere. Arab states aimed to leverage what they could offer—the political and strategic value of peace with Israel—in exchange for bilateral gains from the United States. In this sense, the Abraham Accords took the shape of a triangle: Arab states would normalize relations with Israel and receive corresponding American commitments to their own national interests. This approach required bold thinking since it necessitated flipping the Arab Peace Initiative framework on its head. At its most optimistic, normalization could serve as a bridge to future Israeli-Palestinian peace-making. Critics argued something different: rather than building a bridge, normalization sidestepped the Palestinian issue altogether.

Many Arab governments had furthermore grown frustrated with the Palestinian leaders, believing they had missed repeated opportunities in U.S.-led peace efforts. Privately, they criticized Palestinian Authority (PA) dysfunction and corruption but avoided making public statements, wary of appearing to abandon the Palestinian cause. Still, they resented the idea that normalization with Israel would have to wait for a peace they doubted the Palestinians could deliver.

The news of the Abraham Accords demoralized the PA, whose leaders criticized the deals harshly despite the four-year freeze delivered by UAE negotiations on Israeli plans to annex the West Bank.<sup>12</sup> The Accords had debunked the old idea of linkage, which dictated the idea of peace with the Palestinians as a prerequisite for diplomatic progress with Arab states. The question of whether these Arab states would use their newfound relationship with Israel to act on behalf of the Palestinians remained an open one—and has taken on new dimensions amid the drawn-out war in Gaza. The Abraham Accords deals suited each of the Arab signatories in a different way, as detailed in the following sections:

## United Arab Emirates

Although the UAE undoubtedly sees clear economic advantage in the Abraham Accords, it also shares elements of Israel's geostrategic perspective. Both countries are geographically small and harbor a deep hostility toward Islamist movements, particularly the Muslim Brotherhood.<sup>13</sup> Both have also developed national strategies based on overperformance in science and modernization, and have emerged lately as regional leaders in different areas of artificial intelligence.<sup>14</sup>

Officials familiar with the thinking of their Emirati counterparts also emphasize that the leadership regards Jews as integral to the Middle East and affirms their right to statehood.<sup>15</sup> This outlook is reflected in the framing of the Abraham Accords, whose preamble differs markedly from Israel's earlier peace treaties, which tended to minimize Jewish roots in the region. According to the preamble, "the Arab and Jewish peoples are descendants of a common ancestor, Abraham, and inspired, in that spirit, to foster in the Middle East a reality in which Muslims, Jews, Christians and peoples of all faiths, denominations, beliefs and nationalities live in, and are committed to, a spirit of coexistence, mutual understanding and mutual respect."<sup>16</sup> This language is not mere symbolism. It reflects an intentional Emirati effort to ground normalization in a shared historical and cultural narrative, thereby strengthening the political and societal legitimacy of Arab-Jewish coexistence in the region.

Another indication of Abu Dhabi's distinct approach came during the 2023–24 school year, when the UAE became the first Arab state to teach the Holocaust to students.<sup>17</sup> And even amid the post–October 7 war, Emirati figures have quoted UAE President Muhammad bin Zayed as saying that "there is no reverse gear" on ties with Israel.<sup>18</sup> For Israel, such a stalwart position from a wealthy, visionary regional state offers both reassurance and strategic ballast.

The U.S. context is also important for understanding

the Emirates' normalization with Israel. The UAE, for its part, viewed normalization in bipartisan terms, with officials noting that they received quiet assurances from the Biden campaign that a future Democratic administration would support the Abraham Accords. Abu Dhabi also sought to differentiate itself from Saudi Arabia, whose image among Democrats had suffered after the 2018 murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi.<sup>19</sup> Moreover, talks occurred in the context of the failed U.S.-led "Peace to Prosperity" plan to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict,<sup>20</sup> after which the Israeli government pivoted aggressively toward unilateral annexation of the West Bank until the UAE boldly offered an alternative course.<sup>21</sup> A key moment was a Hebrew-language op-ed by Ambassador Otaiba in the Israeli paper *Yediot Ahronot*, wherein he explained: "In the UAE and much of the Arab world, we would like to believe that Israel is an opportunity, not an enemy. We face too many shared dangers and see the enormous potential for warmer ties."<sup>22</sup>

The UAE had strong reasons to pursue normalization with Israel even absent a resolution of the Palestinian conflict. The Emirates—which hosts a U.S. Air Force hub at the al-Dhafra base—could secure economic, military, and even cultural cooperation with a like-minded regional neighbor while also acquiring the most advanced U.S. fighters and drones of any Arab military (see box on p. 7). Separately, the four-year pause on West Bank annexation would encompass President Trump's second term should he achieve victory in November 2020.<sup>23</sup>

The path was cleared in summer 2020 when Washington assured Abu Dhabi that it would approve cutting-edge arms sales and Israel agreed not to obstruct progress in U.S. Congress over concerns about harm to its qualitative military edge. Despite some domestic Israeli resistance, approval followed from Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu and Defense Minister Benny Gantz.<sup>24</sup> At the White House signing ceremony on September 15, Emirati Foreign Minister Abdullah bin Zayed projected optimism: "I stand here today to extend a hand of peace and receive a hand of peace...Today, we are already witnessing a change in the heart of the Middle East,



Emirati Foreign Minister Abdullah bin Zayed al-Nahyan

**“I stand here today to extend a hand of peace and receive a hand of peace...Today, we are already witnessing a change in the heart of the Middle East, a change that will send hope around the world.”**

a change that will send hope around the world.”<sup>25</sup> Israel had received recognition, the UAE many promised benefits, the U.S. president a win—and for the moment annexation was off the table.<sup>26</sup> President Trump took advantage of the Emirati desire for a breakthrough, and he and envoy Jared Kushner championed the Abraham Accords as a signature diplomatic achievement.

## Bahrain

Bahrain’s decision to normalize relations with Israel was officially announced September 11, 2020, just four days before the White House signing ceremony.<sup>27</sup> Although Bahrain did not seek a formal quid pro quo from America, it likely felt reassured of a long-term commitment to the country’s defense as well as the U.S. naval base in Manama. The base is home to U.S. Naval Forces Central Command (NAVCENT) and the Navy’s Fifth Fleet, comprising approximately 8,300 military personnel, civilians, and family members.<sup>28</sup> Bahrain along with the UAE also gained U.S. recognition as a “major security partner,” although the implications of this status remain ambiguous.<sup>29</sup> And in September 2023, the United States and Bahrain expanded their partnership through the Comprehensive Security Integration and Prosperity Agreement (C-SIPA).<sup>30</sup>

Bahraini moderation toward Israel predated the

Abraham Accords, setting the country apart from its Gulf peers. In December 2018, for example, Foreign Minister Khalid bin Ahmed al-Khalifa condemned Hezbollah’s tunnel-building activities in Lebanon.<sup>31</sup> And at an Atlantic Council event in June 2019, the foreign minister elaborated in a similar vein: “If it wasn’t for Iran being present—Iranian soldiers, Iranian money, Iranian support for Hamas and jihadis that take control of Gaza—we would have been much closer to achieving a better peace between the Palestinians and Israelis...”<sup>32</sup> It bears noting that Bahrain is run by Sunnis despite having a majority-Shia population, and Bahrainis have shown sympathy for Iran. Manama thus relies heavily on Riyadh for support and received the go-ahead from Saudi Arabia before normalizing ties with Israel, according to a senior Bahraini official.

At the White House signing ceremony, Bahraini Foreign Minister Abdullatif bin Rashid al-Zayani echoed the optimism of his Emirati peer: “The declaration supporting peace between the Kingdom of Bahrain and the State of Israel is a historic step on the road to genuine and lasting peace, security and prosperity across the region, and for all who live there, regardless of religion, sect, ethnicity, or ideology.”<sup>33</sup>



Bahraini Foreign Minister Abdullatif bin Rashid al-Zayani

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## Morocco

Of all the normalization signatories, Morocco has the deepest historical ties with Israel. Unofficial security cooperation began in the mid-1960s in response to threats to the Moroccan monarchy inspired by Gamal Abdul Nasser's Arab nationalist government in Egypt, whose ideology swept the region. This partnership enabled King Hassan II to host secret Egypt-Israel talks in Rabat, helping pave the way for Anwar Sadat's 1977 visit to Jerusalem.<sup>34</sup> In the 1990s, Morocco inaugurated quiet diplomatic ties with the Jewish state,<sup>35</sup> welcoming Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin in 1993 and opening a liaison office in Israel.<sup>36</sup> In 1994, a regional economic summit was held in Casablanca on the heels of the Oslo Accords. Ties cooled during the second Palestinian intifada (2000–2004) and the liaison office was closed, but the kingdom takes pride in its Jewish heritage and remains home to one of the Middle East's only sizable Jewish communities. André Azoulay, a prominent Moroccan Jew, has served as a senior advisor to both King Hassan II and his successor, Mohammed VI,<sup>37</sup> and about a million Israelis can claim Moroccan origin.<sup>38</sup>

Morocco was the only country to join the Accords after the November 2020 U.S. election, signing on December 22.<sup>39</sup> This move followed an official statement twelve days earlier in which the United States became the first country to recognize Moroccan sovereignty over Western Sahara—reversing longstanding U.S. policy and effectively ending the long-frozen conflict with the Polisario rebels. The United States has also established a virtual embassy to Western Sahara and pledged to open a physical consulate in the city of Dakhla.<sup>40</sup>

U.S. recognition of Western Sahara has been a diplomatic windfall for Morocco, promising to double the country's territory.<sup>41</sup> Thirty-seven other Arab and European countries have since either expressed openness to recognizing Western Sahara as part of Morocco or opened consular offices there. Israel

itself recognized Moroccan sovereignty in 2023,<sup>42</sup> having apparently waited this long to avoid creating unnecessary friction by moving ahead of Western states.<sup>43</sup>

Morocco has not opened an embassy in Israel but reopened its liaison office in 2021,<sup>44</sup> and its chief of mission has remained at his post during the Gaza war. Initially, Rabat appeared to view an embassy opening as providing leverage with the incoming Biden administration, unsure whether it would honor its predecessor's Western Sahara policy. Now, diplomatic sources indicate the Gaza war as the cause of further delays.<sup>45</sup>

When the normalization deal was formalized in December 2020, Moroccan Foreign Minister Nasser Bourita highlighted the unique ties between the two countries: "Israel's relations with Morocco are special and can't be compared to the relations that Israel has with any other Arab country."<sup>46</sup> For one thing, Morocco had been permitting visits despite the absence of direct flights.<sup>47</sup> Bourita added, "From our perspective, we aren't talking about normalization... We're talking about re-formalizing relations...they never stopped."<sup>48</sup>



Moroccan Foreign Minister Nasser Bourita

**"Israel's relations with Morocco are special and can't be compared to the relations that Israel has with any other Arab country. From our perspective, we aren't talking about normalization... We're talking about re-formalizing relations... they never stopped."**

## Abraham Accords Commitments from the United States



### UAE

- Agreement to sell MQ-9 Reaper drones and F-35s\*



### Bahrain

- Implicit reassurance of enduring U.S. security commitment



### Morocco

- Western Sahara recognition

- Status as a “major security partner”



*\*The F-35 deal ultimately fell through.*



## Sudan

The involvement of Sudan is the least resolved of the Abraham Accords stories and undoubtedly, given the country’s civil war, the least hopeful. The Sudanese government’s stated intention to join the Accords came on October 23, 2020,<sup>49</sup> about a year after the fall of longtime dictator Omar al-Bashir,<sup>50</sup> and less than three years before war exploded between camps headed by the country’s de facto leader, Gen. Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, and his rival, Gen. Mohamed Hamdan “Hemedti” Dagalo.<sup>51</sup> For Sudan, the motives were strategic and economic—chiefly, removal from the U.S. State Sponsors of

Terrorism list, which would unlock international aid and investment<sup>52</sup>—and although Sudan endorsed the declarative portion of the deal at the signing ceremony on January 6, 2021, it never signed on to full normalization.<sup>53</sup> As part of the deal, Sudan agreed to pay \$335 million in compensation to American victims of past terrorist attacks linked to the former regime, including the 1998 U.S. embassy bombings in East Africa and the USS *Cole* attack in 2000. A former senior Trump administration official indicated that the U.S. leadership secured Gulf backing to help cover this payment. Ties with Israel also promised enhanced intelligence sharing and counterterrorism capabilities. But the initiative lacked popular support, especially among Sudanese Islamists, and has been stopped by the war.<sup>54</sup>

## Progress During the Early Years, 2020–22

The period from late 2020 to 2022 served as the high-water mark of the Abraham Accords, characterized by rapid progress in the civilian space. This interval saw the launch of ambitious bilateral initiatives, expansion of diplomatic engagement, and initial steps toward multilateral regional frameworks.

In the case of the UAE, the growth was particularly visible in wide-ranging memorandums of understanding, a flurry of investment partnerships, and throngs of Israeli tourists drawn to the allure of Dubai. An estimated 268,000 Israeli tourists visited the UAE in 2022 alone,<sup>55</sup> and twenty-eight weekly direct flights were announced between the two countries.<sup>56</sup> Further, bilateral trade grew from virtually zero before the Accords to more than \$2.5 billion in 2022.<sup>57</sup> (These figures do not include military-to-military trade, which is omitted from civilian statistics.)

Israel-UAE military relations also deepened during this period, particularly after Yemen's Iran-backed Houthi rebels struck Abu Dhabi International Airport in January 2022, jolting the Emirati leadership.<sup>58</sup> Israel's swift response to this missile strike—contrasted with the Biden administration's slower reaction—shaped Emirati perceptions of both partners and appeared to validate Abu Dhabi's strategic recalibration. The Emirates promptly invited Israeli counterparts for consultations, and Israel subsequently sold its SPYDER air defense system to the UAE.<sup>59</sup>

In addition, in September 2021 the Israeli firm Delek Drilling (now known as NewMed Energy) sold 22 percent of its stake in the Tamar gas field, located off the coast of Haifa, to the UAE company Mubadala Petroleum.<sup>60</sup> Two months later, in November 2021, the Israeli defense firm Elbit Systems launched a UAE enterprise,<sup>61</sup> which in January 2022 was

awarded a roughly \$53 million contract to provide systems to the Emirati air force.<sup>62</sup> The subsequent raft of MOUs and joint ventures even included collaboration between the Israeli and Emirati space agencies.<sup>63</sup>

High-level official visits also accelerated, including by then–Prime Minister Naftali Bennett and then–Foreign Minister Yair Lapid to the UAE and Foreign Minister Abdullah bin Zayed to Israel.<sup>64</sup> Israeli companies eagerly sought to do business in the UAE, and vice versa.<sup>65</sup> The two sides began negotiations on a free trade zone, and later reached the first free trade agreement between Israel and an Arab country.<sup>66</sup>

Israeli trade with Morocco rose more modestly, reaching \$116 million in 2023—still a significant showing in view of the virtually nonexistent trade before the Accords<sup>67</sup> And tourists enthusiastically booked the new direct flights,<sup>68</sup> among them Israelis of Moroccan origin keen to visit the homes of their grandparents and great-grandparents. In 2022 alone, 74,648 Israelis flew to Morocco, and 2,900 Moroccans visited Israel.<sup>69</sup> Yet in the aftermath of October 7, direct flights between the countries stopped.<sup>70</sup>

Morocco also sought to deepen its security relationship with Israel, and in November 2021 the two countries signed a defense MOU, Israel's first with an Arab country.<sup>71</sup> In February 2022, Israel Aerospace Industries agreed to provide the Moroccan military with the Barak MX air and missile defense system in a deal valued at more than \$500 million.<sup>72</sup> That same month, Israel signed its first defense MOU with a Gulf country during Israeli Defense Minister Benny Gantz's visit to Bahrain.<sup>73</sup>

Security collaboration was not just bilateral. In November 2021, Israel along with Bahrain, the UAE, and the United States conducted a multilateral maritime exercise in the Red Sea under CENTCOM auspices.<sup>74</sup> Activity also included intelligence sharing, industrial collaboration, and military-to-military cooperation. In February 2022, the Israeli Navy for the first time joined the U.S. 5th Fleet's biennial International Maritime Exercise.<sup>75</sup>

## Multilateral Initiatives During the Biden Administration

Advocates of the Abraham Accords were initially concerned that the Biden administration would not embrace normalization with the same fervor as the Trump team, based on a sense that the deals diminished Israel's incentive to act on the Palestinian issue. But the Biden administration eventually embraced the concept and spent significant effort seeking additional normalization agreements, most notably between Israel and Saudi Arabia.<sup>76</sup>

President Biden also went on to advance regional integration through major initiatives like the India–Middle East–Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC), which would include Israel and create a network of shipping routes and railways as well as digital and energy infrastructure,<sup>77</sup> serving as an American-led counter to China's Belt and Road Initiative. Although the post–October 7 war has slowed progress on IMEC, in large part due to the impossibility of realizing a proposed Saudi-Jordan-Israel railway link, work has commenced on projects like an India-UAE digital corridor and Cyprus-Israel energy cooperation,<sup>78</sup> while countries including France and Italy have appointed envoys to the initiative.<sup>79</sup> President Trump has embraced IMEC, calling it “one of the greatest trade routes in all of history,” and in February 2025 he met with Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi to discuss the project.<sup>80</sup> Skeptics of IMEC, for their part, point to the high costs of rail travel, other economic hurdles, and security challenges across the Middle East, along with the need for multifaceted execution on such a complex network.<sup>81</sup>

The most ambitious multilateral infrastructure project to emerge during the early Accords period was Project Prosperity, aka the Blue-Green Deal, a landmark water-for-energy exchange created through a 2022 MOU between Israel, Jordan, and the UAE.<sup>82</sup>

It notably arose outside the much-touted but unrealized Negev Forum.<sup>83</sup> Project Prosperity stipulated that Jordan would provide 600 megawatts of solar energy to Israel annually in exchange for 200 million cubic meters of desalinated water.<sup>84</sup> The UAE's state-owned Masdar renewable energy outfit would build the solar facility in the Hashemite Kingdom and sell power to Israel for \$180 million a year, thereafter sharing profits with Jordan.<sup>85</sup> Each country would tap its comparative advantage: Israel, with its Mediterranean-based desalination expertise, would supply water to water-scarce Jordan, while Jordan's vast desert would host the solar plant to help advance Israel's clean energy goals. But the Blue-Green Deal faltered after the start of the Gaza war when Jordan withdrew in November 2023 and all activities were put on hold.<sup>86</sup> Still, the kingdom's increasingly dire water shortage will likely prompt Amman to seek a revival of Project Prosperity with Israel at some point after the Gaza war, according to officials.

The Negev Forum included impressive working groups on health, regional security, education and tolerance, water and food security, tourism, and energy, but it was hobbled by the question of Palestinian participation.

The arena encompassing energy and space saw another multilateral opportunity arise from Israel-UAE cooperation. In 2022, the I2U2 framework was created by India, Israel, the UAE, and the United States to invest in projects addressing global challenges in areas like water, energy, transportation, space, health, food security, and technology. One I2U2 project sought to create a space-based tool for policymakers, institutions, and entrepreneurs to aid in their work on climate change and improve cooperation in space data applications.<sup>87</sup> In April 2025, the Atlantic Council hosted a dialogue in New Delhi on the future of I2U2, as well as IMEC, that gathered “senior government officials and leading experts from India, Israel, the United Arab Emirates, and the United States.” Although no deals were announced, participants explored new areas of potential cooperation in critical minerals, AI, infrastructure, and other fields.<sup>88</sup>



Pictured (left to right) at the Negev Forum meeting in Sde Boker, Israel, March 2022: Bahraini Foreign Minister Abdullatif bin Rashid al-Zayani, Egyptian Foreign Minister Sameh Shoukry, Israeli Foreign Minister Yair Lapid, U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken, Moroccan Foreign Minister Nasser Bourita, and UAE Foreign Minister Sheikh Abdullah bin Zayed al-Nahyan. The forum included impressive working groups on health, regional security, education and tolerance, water and food security, tourism, and energy, but it ultimately collapsed over the lack of Palestinian representation.

## Israeli Politics as an Obstacle to Progress

When he reassumed office in late 2022, Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu formed a governing coalition that included far-right politicians Bezalel Smotrich as minister of finance and Itamar Ben-Gvir as minister of national security. Both were unapologetic West Bank annexationists, and Ben-Gvir asserted Israeli control over Jerusalem's al-Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount, disputing the status quo arrangements for Muslim worship.<sup>89</sup> Ben-Gvir's walks at the religious

site made headlines in Arab media, inflaming public opinion. In response, the Abraham Accords countries curtailed their public engagement with Israel, and visits by senior Israeli ministers effectively came to a halt. Ironically, signatory Netanyahu had thus missed the Accords' "golden" period, having been out of office from June 2021 to December 2022.

Trade with the UAE also appears to have suffered during this period, declining by \$1.26 billion between 2022 and 2023, according to the UN Comtrade database.<sup>90</sup> Yet the same interval also saw growth in Israeli trade with Bahrain (by \$7.2 million) and Morocco (by almost \$140 million).<sup>91</sup>

## October 7 and Aftermath

After the Hamas-led attack of October 7, 2023, the tone of statements from Abraham Accords states varied. The one from the UAE Ministry of Foreign Affairs was unequivocal in naming Hamas as the perpetrator targeting “Israel towns and villages” and asserting it was “appalled by reports that Israeli civilians have been abducted as hostages from their homes.”<sup>92</sup> Bahrain’s Foreign Ministry was similarly clear, if slightly less explicit, omitting the word “Israeli” when referring to the suffering of civilians. The ministry further “stressed the need to immediately stop the ongoing fighting between the Palestinian Hamas movement and the Israeli forces.”<sup>93</sup> Morocco’s statement was vaguer. While condemning the violence against civilians, Rabat did not single out Hamas, instead voicing “deep concern over the deterioration of the situation and the outbreak of military operations in the Gaza strip.”<sup>94</sup> Sudan, for its part, noted merely that “the violence stemmed from a decline in international interest in the Palestinian issue.”<sup>95</sup> All statements called for the resumption of progress toward a two-state solution.<sup>96</sup>

The Gaza war has tested the Abraham Accords but remarkably has not broken them. Media coverage of widespread death, destruction, and hunger, along with an apparent reluctance by Israeli officials to entertain a political endgame, has stoked fury across Arab countries and deep frustration among Arab leaders, awakening a long dormant cause. Protesters filled the streets in Bahrain and Morocco, where popular support for normalization dropped from 31 percent in 2022 to 13 percent in 2024.<sup>97</sup> Even in the UAE, which generally bars protests, demonstrators were permitted at the COP28 UN

Climate Change Summit in Dubai, where they called for a ceasefire.<sup>98</sup>

Further, whereas Netanyahu’s new right-wing government weakened public engagement between Israel and its new Arab partners, developments after October 7, 2023, banished such activity almost completely. Israeli leaders ceased their official visits to Arab capitals, and no new state-run economic initiatives were announced. Similarly downbeat was the scuttling of the flagship Project Prosperity energy-for-water deal.<sup>99</sup> And the Hamas attack happened mere weeks after the inception of the India–Middle East–Europe Economic Corridor, whose architects were counting on a bold Israel-Saudi normalization deal to maximize its potential.

Yet even during the fighting in 2023, Riyadh was still considering a three-way deal involving normalization of relations with Israel, a series of bilateral U.S.-Saudi agreements including a defense treaty, and progress on the Palestinian file.<sup>100</sup> This appeared to validate the previous year’s comment by Saudi Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman, known as MbS, that “we don’t look at Israel as an enemy, we look to them as a potential ally, with many interests that we can pursue together”—although he qualified that “we have to solve some issues before we get to that.”<sup>101</sup>

A mega-deal like that proposed for Israel, Saudi Arabia, and the United States would have been an extraordinary achievement, propelling Arab-Israel normalization into new terrain given Riyadh’s power, wealth, and status as Guardian of Islam’s Two Holy Mosques. It likewise would have ended a publicly adversarial relationship with the most influential Sunni state dating to Israel’s founding in 1948, potentially creating ripple effects for other Arab and Muslim-majority countries.

## Assessing the Abraham Accords in the War Years

The Abraham Accords have survived the post-October 7 war, but they also face new complications that will require deft diplomacy and close communication with relevant actors. Yet any evaluation of positive and negative indicators, such as the following, must be regarded as preliminary given regional and other uncertainties.

### Positive Indicators

Reasons for optimism include:

- Maintenance of ties.** Despite the heavy stresses created by the Gaza war, no Abraham Accords country has withdrawn or suspended participation or broken ties with Israel. They have held steady in the face of powerful public pressure to the contrary, remaining mindful of the national self-interest that drove them to sign the Accords. But progress in diplomatic relations, it must be noted, has been somewhat tenuous. Morocco has paused the opening of its planned consulate, even as it has kept open its liaison office. And Israel has maintained only a scaled-down diplomatic presence in the Gulf countries, sometimes without an ambassador on site. In late July 2025, Israel evacuated most of its diplomatic mission to the UAE following threats from Iran-backed militias linked to the June war and the worsening humanitarian crisis in Gaza.<sup>102</sup> Outside the Accords, Jordan—facing intense protests in Amman—has recalled its ambassador and closed its embassy, citing security risks, although Jordanian officials say they expect the embassy to reopen when the Gaza war ends.
- Continued economic links and arms sales.** Despite a more than \$1 billion decline in trade since October 7,<sup>103</sup> overall economic and arms activity with Abraham Accords countries has held up. In the Emirates, trade rebounded by 5 percent in 2024 after falling 46 percent the previous year.<sup>104</sup> In Bahrain, between 2022 and 2024, trade dipped 3 percent, although marked by significant fluctuations during that period.<sup>105</sup> The upward trajectory is striking with Morocco, with trade quadrupling over 2022–24.
- Arms sales, largely invisible to publics, also grew during this period.** In 2024 alone, signatories of the Accords accounted for 12 percent of Israel's nearly \$15 billion in arms exports. In spring 2024, Israel and Morocco agreed to establish a drone manufacturing plant, with BlueBird Aerosystems announcing it would soon begin operating in Morocco.<sup>106</sup> And in July 2024, Morocco signed a \$1 billion deal to purchase a spy satellite from Israel Aerospace Industries, followed by a February 2025 agreement to acquire thirty-six ATMOS 2000 self-propelled artillery systems from Israel's Elbit Systems.<sup>107</sup>
- Israel-UAE military sales have been especially vigorous in late 2025.** The UAE's EDGE Group is in talks with Elbit Systems to obtain the Hermes 900 unmanned aerial vehicle,<sup>108</sup> including a phased technology-transfer plan that would allow the UAE to manufacture the systems domestically. EDGE Group also reached a deal to invest \$10 million for a 30 percent stake in Israel's ThirdEye Systems, which produces an AI-based product that detects drones and UAVs.<sup>109</sup>
- Continued tourism and direct flights.** UAE-based FlyDubai might just be the most striking embodiment of Abraham Accords resilience post-October 7, with up to ten daily flights connecting the countries. By contrast, U.S. and European carriers have routinely canceled flights to Israel over war-related security concerns.<sup>110</sup>
- Bilateral and regional security coordination.** Throughout the war, bilateral counterterrorism intelligence sharing has persisted between Israel and Morocco and the UAE—as well as Egypt and Jordan. A number of countries also cooperated to achieve integrated air defense under the

CENTCOM umbrella, an endeavor that coalesced on April 13, 2024, when under U.S. leadership, Arab and European countries—along with Israel itself—were part of an unprecedented effort to thwart three hundred incoming Iranian projectile strikes headed for Israel.

Close coordination follows on many other fronts. In June 2024, then-IDF Chief of Staff Lt. Gen. Herzi Halevi reportedly met in Bahrain with counterparts from Arab militaries under CENTCOM auspices to discuss regional security cooperation.<sup>111</sup> This past spring, the UAE participated in the Greece-hosted Iniochos 2025 military exercise with Israel, the United States, and others, with Bahrain as an observer.<sup>112</sup> For this exercise, the UAE sent Mirage 2008-9 fighter jets to the U.S. and Israeli Air Forces. And in April 2025, Israel participated in the U.S.-led African Lion exercise held in Morocco and nearby African countries, an undertaking that brought together African, Arab, and European forces.<sup>113</sup>

- **Supply of humanitarian aid to Gaza.** The inadequacy of food and other aid reaching Gazans has reached new crisis levels in 2025. But Abraham Accords status has at times afforded a certain level of trust with Israeli officials, facilitating improved aid supply especially from the UAE, which was reportedly providing more than 40 percent of all aid to the Strip as of May.<sup>114</sup> The Emirates also flew injured Gazans to the UAE for treatment and established four hospitals and six desalination plants in Gaza, in addition to bakeries capable of serving a half-million people a day.<sup>115</sup> With the international outcry having intensified over the hunger crisis, the UAE no longer highlights its aid distribution as a payoff for normalization—although it may have done so during earlier periods. Jordan, whose peace with Israel predates the Accords, also earned leeway as an aid purveyor.
- **Back-channel diplomatic engagement.** Despite the absence of high-level official visits, quiet but close coordination has continued between Israel

and the UAE—as well as coordination on Israeli hostages with non-Accords countries Egypt and Qatar. Emirati Foreign Minister Abdullah bin Zayed has held many rounds of talks with Israeli Strategic Affairs Minister Ron Dermer to explore a “day after” scenario in Gaza—talks that could hypothetically inform transitional arrangements for post-Hamas governance. The two officials evidently have good chemistry, and both countries harbor a deep antipathy toward Hamas and its affiliate, the Muslim Brotherhood, as well as a vision of removing Hamas from power.

## Negative Indicators

Reasons for concern include:

- **Skepticism of Israeli intentions and chilled public engagement.** Gulf officials are said to be increasingly worried that Israel under the Netanyahu government can no longer even be considered a status quo state working with its neighbors for the good of the region. Associated comments about the Israeli campaign in Gaza often portray the government as a destabilizing element.<sup>116</sup> Public displays of warmth, as seen between leaders on the White House lawn in September 2020, have likewise gone dormant.
- **Indefinite pause in Israel-Saudi normalization talks.** The late Hamas leader Yahya al-Sinwar can claim a major achievement in channeling Arab anger over the Gaza war to reforge a link between Israel-Saudi normalization and the Palestinian file.<sup>117</sup> As long as Israel’s campaign in Gaza continues without a political vision for Palestinian governance, efforts to expand the Abraham Accords—especially to include Saudi Arabia—are unlikely to move forward.
- **Delay or suspension of civilian-integration and infrastructure projects.** Standout examples include the IMEC trade route and Project Prosperity. Despite the stalled progress, President Trump has voiced his strong approval of IMEC, which could be a curb on Chinese aspirations in the Middle East.

## How a New Regional Landscape Could Shape the Accords

Beginning in 2024, Israel executed a relentless military campaign that severely degraded the pillars of Iran's regional strategy: its threat network, its ballistic missile arsenal, and most recently its nuclear program through the June 2025 twelve-day war. These developments enabled the rise of new political leaders in Lebanon and Syria and the apparent remaking of the regional order, in turn changing the way actors pursue their interests. For Israel, the altered landscape presented a real opportunity to create more stable security arrangements on its Lebanon and Syria borders, despite frustration among Middle East leaders with its conduct of the Gaza war.

None of this is meant to diminish current hazards. An immediate threat involves the Yemen-based Houthis, who are still firing missiles and drones at Israel every few days as of summer 2025.<sup>118</sup> Israel responded in August by carrying out airstrikes that killed the Houthi government's prime minister and other cabinet members.<sup>119</sup> Finally, there is the obstacle of the Gaza war, which must end for any further expansion of the Abraham Accords to occur.<sup>120</sup> Nevertheless, as elaborated here, the major prospects to watch are Syria, Lebanon, and Saudi Arabia.

### Syria

With the fall of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's regime in late 2024, Iran lost its only regional state partner—as well as a conduit to support Hezbollah and associated arms-smuggling activities.<sup>121</sup> Israel has responded with sometimes-controversial military actions inside Syria in a campaign avowedly designed to address its security concerns. Drawing most outrage was the Israeli strike on Syria's Defense Ministry in July 2025, claimed to be in defense of

the Druze population in Suwayda governorate.<sup>122</sup> Whereas in Suwayda the two sides have communicated to contain the fighting,<sup>123</sup> Israel's seizure of territory in the Mount Hermon area, the Syrian Golan Heights, and around Quneitra will require close negotiation and confidence-building measures.<sup>124</sup> A separate focal point for Israel will be ensuring that Turkey—a patron of the new Damascus government—maintains a policy of avoiding escalation in Syria.<sup>125</sup>

Yet these details—albeit important—must not obscure an extraordinary fact: Damascus and Jerusalem are in regular contact at the foreign minister level, facilitated by Washington.

The new Syrian president, Ahmed al-Sharaa, would seem an unlikely partner for Israel. He gained recognition as the jihadist leader of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, an al-Qaeda breakaway that ultimately demonstrated pragmatism while governing territory in northwest Syria. In a December 2024 interview conducted soon after he took power, Sharaa said that Syria sought no conflict with Israel.<sup>126</sup> In May 2025, as relayed by President Trump, he evidently expressed interest in eventually joining the Abraham Accords, although he later clarified that this would not happen in the near term.<sup>127</sup> Furthermore, the Syrian leader has indicated his desire to return to the 1974 disengagement lines established after the Yom Kippur War.<sup>128</sup> But major hurdles remain: Israel will want modifications to the 1974 lines with a view toward border security, and Israel-Syria normalization is unlikely to occur without the resolution of core disputes such as the Golan Heights. Moreover, the Syrian government is fragile, and many of its formerly jihadist fighters harbor strongly anti-Israel views.<sup>129</sup>

A nonbelligerency pact could be the bridge, allowing Syria to join other Arab Sunni states engaging with Israel. On the Druze issue, local security and humanitarian arrangements could allow for some economic growth and cross-border labor exchanges—developments that could appeal to Israel given its connection to its own Druze population. In July 2025, Syrian Information Minister Hamza Mustafa reportedly indicated that the two sides were holding indirect

talks regarding the disengagement accord.<sup>130</sup> By late August 2025, direct talks were underway between Syrian Foreign Minister Assad al-Shaibani and Israeli Strategic Affairs Minister Ron Dermer aimed at establishing a security agreement. For a country long seen as the “beating heart” of Arab rejectionism, such developments are remarkable in themselves and could be a gateway to further bilateral improvements.<sup>131</sup>

## Lebanon

In September 2024, following a year of steady but contained fighting on its northern front, Israel targeted Hezbollah officials with a devastating pager/walkie-talkie attack, followed by strikes against leaders including Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah and a ground invasion into southern Lebanon. The war eviscerated Hezbollah and neutered its ability to carry out sustained attacks on Israel. In November 2024, a ceasefire agreement offered the prospect of calm in the north,<sup>132</sup> and the inauguration of Joseph Aoun as Lebanon’s new president suggested the country might be headed toward true sovereignty after decades of interference by outside actors, first Syria and later Iran and Iran-backed Hezbollah. The silence from Iran’s Lebanese proxy during the June 2025 war suggested weakness, but Hezbollah has not yet given up its weapons. In summer 2025, the Lebanese government voted to disarm Hezbollah before the year’s end, although heavy discussion has ensued about thorny questions of implementation.<sup>133</sup>

When he entered office in January 2025, President Aoun declared that the Lebanese government must have a monopoly on weapons,<sup>134</sup> breaking from years during which Hezbollah operated as a state within a state, nourished by a steady flow of Iranian arms. Reports suggest that since Aoun took office, the Lebanese military has drawn on Israeli intelligence to identify and confiscate Hezbollah’s arms largely south of the Litani River.<sup>135</sup> Yet Lebanese leaders have made clear that any normalization agreement with Israel would need to address the Palestinian issue, as well as lingering territorial disputes. In May 2025,

Prime Minister Nawaf Salam said, “I would like to see a two-state solution, Israeli withdrawing [from the] occupied territories in exchange for peace. And peace will lead to normalization or normalization is part and parcel of the peace.”<sup>136</sup> Aoun elaborated, “The Americans currently know that normalization or peace negotiations with Israel are impossible, and the key for us today is to establish long-term stability on the border.”<sup>137</sup>

With American assistance, Israel must therefore push to achieve interim goals such as Hezbollah’s disarmament and the disruption of financial flows to the group, including through the potential sanctioning of complicit Lebanese officials.<sup>138</sup> In return, Lebanon would want Israel to halt its airstrikes into southern Lebanon and withdraw from its five military positions established there during the current war.<sup>139</sup> Prime Minister Netanyahu has floated a reduced presence in southern Lebanon in exchange for progress on these matters.<sup>140</sup> Thus, a basic sequencing mechanism can be discerned wherein Lebanese steps on Hezbollah disarmament are matched by visible Israeli force reductions. Such initiatives could be paired with talks to demarcate the Israel-Lebanon border and convene a major international economic conference aimed at revitalizing Lebanon’s economy. With the exception of Shebaa Farms and Hezbollah’s claims to several villages,<sup>141</sup> Israel and Lebanon have only minor territorial disputes, and Shebaa could be removed from the bilateral mix should Syria seek sovereignty over this territory at the UN.

## Saudi Arabia

In a September 2023 interview, MbS said normalization with Israel was “getting closer every day”<sup>142</sup>—but he also stressed the importance of resolving the Palestinian issue as part of a deal. The incentive for Saudi Arabia would be U.S. security guarantees and support for a civilian nuclear program. Momentum here was facilitated by intensive shuttle diplomacy headlined by U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken, National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan, and National Security Council officials Brett McGurk and Amos

Hochstein, who cast a U.S.-Saudi defense pact as a complement to Israel-Saudi normalization.<sup>143</sup> Yet this progress likely contributed to Yahya al-Sinwar's decision to act. The Hamas leader evidently informed the group's Political Bureau days before the October 7 attack that Israel-Saudi normalization was "progressing significantly" and risked opening the door for other Arab and Muslim-majority countries. Hamas's goal, he said, was to "bring about a major move or a strategic shift" in the region's balance on the Palestinian issue.<sup>144</sup>

Hamas could soon claim success, as measured by shifts in Saudi rhetoric. In May 2024, Riyadh was insisting on a path to a two-state solution while Israeli leaders balked.<sup>145</sup> By January 2025, MbS was even more explicit when he "clearly and unequivocally reaffirmed...that Saudi Arabia will continue its relentless efforts to establish an independent Palestinian state with East Jerusalem as its capital, and will not establish diplomatic relations with Israel without that."<sup>146</sup> And in July 2025, apparently reflecting the latest Saudi position, the UN High Level International Conference in New York City—cohosted by Saudi Arabia and France—issued a declaration likewise describing normalization as intertwined with Palestinian statehood.<sup>147</sup> Yet as long as the current Israeli government remains in place, probably until 2026, two hard-right cabinet members will veto any talks with the PA—whether about its return to Gaza or a broader political horizon for Palestinians. After the trauma of October 7, the idea of supporting Palestinian statehood still seems distant for many Israelis, who remain wary of a Hamas resurgence despite the group's weakness—and believe territorial withdrawal will equate to greater vulnerability.

Culturally, the kingdom does not feel an affinity for Israel like the UAE does, and Israel is less intrinsically important to Saudi national strategy despite being a potential player. For Riyadh, normalization has likely been less about peace and more about securing a defense treaty with Washington.<sup>148</sup>

Setting aside the Gaza effect and other bilateral dynamics, MbS reflects a generational shift in the

kingdom. Since the war, his language about Palestinian self-determination has grown more impassioned, but a larger arc shows him to be less ideological about Israel, viewing it as a potential tech partner and not solely through the prism of the Palestinians. His overall approach appears to have earned the respect of President Trump, who has cited normalization as a U.S. goal but stepped back from pushing the crown prince in the current climate. During his May 2025 visit to Riyadh, addressing MbS, he said, "You'll do it in your own time."<sup>149</sup>

In principle, a breakthrough with Saudi Arabia remains the most promising path for expanding normalization—despite its current unlikelihood amid the war and Israel's right-wing government. Riyadh's unique status as Guardian of the Two Holy Mosques gives it unmatched influence in the Muslim world. And if Saudi Arabia were to formalize ties with Israel, it could pave the way for other Arab and even non-Arab Muslim countries like Indonesia to follow suit.

A potential near-term path might involve seeking objectives short of normalization, like cooperation on Red Sea security matters or the establishment of an economic/tourism zone encompassing Eilat in Israel and Tabuk and the futuristic NEOM city in Saudi Arabia. Other important aspects of a deal could include a civil nuclear agreement and agreements on AI and free trade.

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## Other Potential Candidates

After Israel's June 2025 war against Iran, President Trump's envoy Steve Witkoff expressed confidence that other countries would join the Abraham Accords, implying a list exceeding the oft-mentioned prospects. "We are hoping for normalization across an array of countries that maybe people would have never contemplated would come in," he said.<sup>150</sup> But Gulf officials do not necessarily share the U.S. envoy's breathless outlook. Instead, particularly in their rhetoric about Israel's campaign in Gaza, they more

often cast the Israeli government as a destabilizing element, perhaps further contributing to delays in normalization.<sup>151</sup> Still, whenever the time comes, the following candidates inside and outside the Middle East bear watching.

## **Qatar**

Qatar is viewed as a controversial actor that has hedged by maintaining relationships with diverse countries from Iran to the United States and Israel. It has hosted Hamas leaders for almost two decades and provided financial support to Gaza with the consent of the Israeli government.<sup>152</sup> Qatar also shares North Dome, the world's largest gas field, with Iran. And it hosts al-Udeid Air Base, America's largest in the region and home to the Combined Air Operations Center—which coordinates all CENTCOM air operations. CAOC played a key role in defending Israel from Iranian missile attacks in April and October 2024.

Consistent with its open diplomatic approach, Qatar has shown a willingness to quietly engage Israel. It inaugurated a trade mission in Israel during the Oslo years, although later closing it during the second intifada. Doha also allowed Israeli athletes to compete in regional events and welcomed Israeli fans to the 2022 World Cup despite a lack of formal ties. Yet Qatar's state-funded Al Jazeera news organization has long given sympathetic coverage to the Muslim Brotherhood and its affiliates, and Arab viewers report that it remains more critical of the United States and Israel than other mainstream Arab networks. Finally, after Hamas leader Yahya al-Sinwar's death in October 2024, Sheikha Moza bint Nasser—mother of Qatari leader Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani—posted her support: "He will live on and they will be gone."<sup>153</sup>

Qatar's close relations with the United States are further reflected in the \$243.5 billion in economic deals inked during President Trump's visit in May 2025.<sup>154</sup> Doha, along with Egypt, has engaged in high-level mediation efforts to end the Gaza war, enabled by its ties to the United States, Israel, and Hamas

alike. It also backed the Saudi position laid out in the New York communique of July 29, 2025, which directly links normalization to a two-state solution.<sup>155</sup> Given existing high-level Israeli engagement—and the pro-Islamist leanings of some royals—Qatar would appear to have little incentive to normalize now, although the odds could rise if Saudi Arabia does so. Yet Israel's September 2025 attack on a meeting of Hamas officials in Doha will likely dim near-term prospects for better relations.

## **Oman**

The Sultanate of Oman has long maintained quiet ties with Israel, and under the late Sultan Qaboos bin Said it was the only Arab country except Egypt to vote for the 1979 Egypt-Israel peace treaty at the United Nations. Qaboos also publicly hosted Israeli leaders, including Yitzhak Rabin in 1994, Shimon Peres in 1996, and Binyamin Netanyahu in 2018.<sup>156</sup> But no such visits have occurred since Sultan Haitham bin Tariq al-Said took power in 2020, and the Foreign Ministry's statements about Israel have been some of the harshest in the Gulf. Oman's Grand Mufti has been an especially unsparing critic of Israel's conduct of the war, and he decried the idea of normalizing ties with a "vanishing entity."<sup>157</sup> Still, some informal ties between Muscat and Jerusalem persist, including on desalination.<sup>158</sup> Oman has also upheld close relations with Iran, applying its customary caution. Having served as a mediator during the 2015 nuclear talks, Muscat did so again both late in the Biden administration and with the Trump team before the June 2025 Iran-Israel war.

## **Indonesia**

Indonesia is an 87 percent majority Muslim country with nearly 300 million inhabitants.<sup>159</sup> The country is home to the world's two largest Islamic movements, Nahdlatul Ulama and the Muhammadiyah Society, both of which have maintained ties with Israel for decades.<sup>160</sup> Normalization with Israel could expand existing trade, giving Jakarta access to Israeli expertise in high-tech sectors such as agriculture,

water management, security, and defense, while opening Israel to Indonesian raw materials and tourists visiting Muslim holy sites.<sup>161</sup> Indonesia could also potentially gain entry to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, to which member Israel has objected based on the lack of diplomatic relations between the two countries.<sup>162</sup>

Like other prospects, however, Indonesia would likely condition normalization on progress toward a two-state solution. In May 2025, Indonesia President Prabowo Subianto explained: “Once Israel recognizes Palestine as an independent state, we will be ready to recognize Israel and establish diplomatic relations. The two-state solution and freedom for Palestine are the only paths to true peace.”<sup>163</sup> But he also acknowledged “Israel’s right to exist as a sovereign state, and [said] its security must be guaranteed.”<sup>164</sup> Indonesian popular opinion may well align with such statements. In the interim and especially after the war, Israel and Indonesia could explore incremental moves to expand trade, tourism, and security cooperation without formal recognition.

## Mauritania

The Islamic Republic of Mauritania, one of the poorest Arab states, relies on U.S. support for debt relief through the IMF and World Bank.<sup>165</sup> In 1999, during the Oslo era, the northwest African country established ties with Israel at the urging of the Clinton administration,<sup>166</sup> but later suspended them after the 2008–9 Gaza war.<sup>167</sup> For Israel, the main problem involves ties to Hamas cultivated by Mauritanian President Mohamed Ould Ghazouani—although this dynamic could change. Mauritania also appears to have avoided the Iranian influence that has infiltrated other parts of West Africa.<sup>168</sup> Fully normalized relations with Israel would likely have to wait until after the Gaza war and could be implemented in phases, likely facilitated by Morocco in the interest of accommodating Washington.<sup>169</sup> Yet some personal rapport may now exist following a July 2025 meeting between President Ghazouani and Prime Minister Netanyahu evidently arranged by President Trump.<sup>170</sup>

## Azerbaijan

Azerbaijan already maintains strong diplomatic and economic connections with Israel, grounded in shared security concerns about Iran. Their cooperation, spanning joint military exercises and advanced weapons transfers, dates back nearly thirty years to when Israel sought a reliable oil partner and Azerbaijan wanted Israeli defense technology.<sup>171</sup> Formalizing this relationship would further solidify their defense partnership and could also bring Azerbaijan closer to the U.S.-led regional coalition, offering Baku greater protection against Iran. For Washington, Azerbaijan’s accession would mean gaining a strategically placed ally on Iran’s northern border.<sup>172</sup> But the status quo may also be workable for the time being, with no need to formalize ties. Separately, Azeri leaders were crucial in facilitating meetings between Israel, Syria, and Turkey regarding a potential security deal in southern Syria in summer 2025.

## Somaliland

Both Israel and the unrecognized Republic of Somaliland—which is still legally part of Somalia—could benefit if they were to somehow normalize relations. On the security front, Somaliland is located near the Red Sea, a key corridor where cooperation with Israel could enable joint maritime security, intelligence sharing, and other efforts to counter regional threats including attacks by Houthi forces.<sup>173</sup> Economically, Somaliland seeks to diversify its livestock-based economy, while Israel’s expertise in agri-tech, infrastructure, and water management offers natural synergies. For Israel, a trade link from the Eilat and Ashdod ports to Somaliland could expand access to African markets. While formal ties are unlikely during the Gaza war, the prospect of future normalization merits closer attention.<sup>174</sup> Somaliland leaders are said to be highly interested in establishing open ties, including trade offices, visits, and security cooperation. They do not expect recognition, however, and realize that Israel has an intermittent dialogue with Somali President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud.

## Policy Recommendations

While the Gaza war has chilled Israel's integration with Arab actors, a status check shows the Abraham Accords to be remarkably durable, while yielding benefits in economic, military, and even cultural areas. Specifically, countries recognize the security benefits of partnering with Israel, and the UAE goes a step farther in viewing Israel as a key partner for regional stability and economic modernization for a post-oil age.

The architecture now exists to expand the Abraham Accords, including avenues for quiet progress. Moreover, Israel's national election is scheduled for 2026, and Arab states can aspire to simultaneously pursue relations with Israel, demonstrate a commitment to rebuilding Gaza, and support Palestinian self-determination should a governing coalition emerge that is open to making policy adjustments, especially on the Palestinians. Bearing these points in mind, the United States can follow several principles in supporting existing Abraham Accords deals and pursuing new ones:

### ADOPT AN INCREMENTAL APPROACH

Despite the unlikelihood of progress on additional Abraham Accords deals in the near term, meaningful integration with Israel and across the region endures, along with quiet diplomatic engagement. Arab actors now embrace the U.S.-held idea that direct engagement with Israel is preferable to mediated engagement, and can deliver tangible results in the civilian and security sectors. Even as normalization between Israel and countries inside and outside the Middle East should remain the ultimate objective, the United States can now focus on nurturing existing frameworks for integration, facilitating diplomatic and security arrangements below the threshold of full normalization, and pushing Israel to adjust its policies toward Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza, including improving conditions for the distribution of food and other aid.

### ENGAGE ISRAEL ON WAR-RELATED ISSUES

U.S. interaction with Israel about the Palestinians should center on three principles:

- Clearly oppose the forced displacement of Palestinians from Gaza, indefinite Israeli occupation of the territory, and annexation in the West Bank.** Any of these moves would strain the U.S. commitment to its partnership with Israel and foreclose expansion of the Abraham Accords. The United States should urge Israel to take steps—and make its own declarative policy—opposing the forced displacement of Gazans to other countries, the indefinite occupation of Gaza, or the annexation of West Bank territory. Recent calls by Israeli Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich to unilaterally annex the territory in response to planned recognition of a Palestinian state by several Western countries drew a strong rebuke from Emirati envoy Lana Nusseibeh, who asserted that any such action would “cross a ‘red line’ that would ‘end the vision of regional integration.’”<sup>175</sup>
- Insist that Israel commit at the political level and immediately begin planning for postwar Gaza.** Any plan to rebuild Gaza will require a large-scale donors’ conference and extensive civilian and military planning. This work would be most effective if convened under the auspices of the United States, in part because it could include as many Arab foreign ministers as possible alongside Israeli representatives.
- Support steps to revitalize the Palestinian Authority.** While PA reform has thus far failed to produce a new generation of leaders ready to advocate pragmatically and effectively for the Palestinian people, Washington can lead the way in offering incentives to maintain focus on this critical issue. In the past, Prime Minister Netanyahu supported steps to reform the PA—which remains the entity best positioned to govern postwar Gaza—but today far-right members of his coalition are moving forward with policies to undermine the governing body.<sup>176</sup> U.S. advocacy on this front will therefore require a clear policy of

support for a reformed PA, creativity in working with Israeli counterparts to adjust their policies, and partnership with Arab and Western actors.

## STRENGTHEN (OR REVIVE) EXISTING INTEGRATION INITIATIVES

Such efforts can focus on the India–Middle East–Europe Economic Corridor, Project Prosperity, and multilateral air defense.

- A central feature of IMEC is the proposed Saudi Arabia–Jordan–Israel rail link, a project that relies directly on public- and private-sector cooperation and includes the installation of underground cables, pipelines, and integrated electricity grids. But the Gaza war has slowed IMEC’s progress. For now, the United States should encourage Saudi Arabia to develop detailed infrastructure plans—e.g., for a rail line connecting the kingdom to Haifa—to signal its eventual commitment to regional connectivity under the appropriate political conditions. Israel would undoubtedly be attracted by the idea of having its Ashdod and Haifa ports serve as nodes between the Arabian Peninsula and Europe.

A next step, when political conditions allow, would be the formation of an international steering committee to advance planning for IMEC infrastructure projects. Both Israel and Saudi Arabia have already designated coordinating ministries—Israel’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Saudi Arabia’s Ministry of Energy. For their part, the UAE and India have begun deepening their cooperation: non-oil trade between the two countries reached \$65 billion in 2024, representing 20.5 percent growth from 2023.<sup>177</sup> And the Emirates has signed a deal to build a port in Syria for IMEC.<sup>178</sup> Over time, multilateral forums like IMEC could expand to include business sectors and civil society.

Project Prosperity, aka the Blue-Green Deal—stalled since October 7 and facing hurdles even before then—is propelled by Jordan’s desperate

need for water, which will increase sharply over the next decade, according to conversations with officials. To alleviate this challenge, Jordan will need pipelines from the Red Sea as well as cooperation with Israel. (Israel would receive lower-cost, solar-produced electricity from Jordan in the deal.) Reflecting its need for water, Jordan has repeatedly though quietly renewed its emergency water purchase agreement with Israel, despite tensions produced by Israel’s prosecution of the war in Gaza. The United States should act as a trusted intermediary to relaunch the project.

- Given CENTCOM’s demonstrated success in helping thwart Iranian attacks on Israel, the United States should pursue deepening regional military integration beyond air defense coordination. Such efforts should be guided by several key themes:
  - Messaging that asserts such initiatives are defensive in nature
  - Reassurance about the U.S. commitment to regional security, given concerns regarding its pivot to Asia and domestic priorities
  - An emphasis on acquisitions of military systems from trusted sources—i.e., not China or Russia
  - The necessity of real-time information sharing that comes only from interoperable, secure communications
  - The facilitation of working groups that provide space for countries that have not yet normalized relations with Israel to engage on areas of mutual concern.<sup>179</sup>
- **Prompt a regional rethink on Iran.** Events over the past two years, exemplified by the June 2025 war, have shown Iran to be incapable of mounting the kind of retaliatory actions many actors feared. This means countries across the Middle East might no longer be deterred by the threat of aggressive pushback from Iran if they consider taking steps with Israel to reinforce their security. Once the Gaza war ends, and even before, they might thus be more inclined to take steps in the direction of normalizing ties with Israel.

- **Urge Israel to recognize that the aftermath of the Gaza war will be a supreme opportunity—and test—for cooperation with Arab states.**

The task of reconstructing Gaza and fostering viable governance in the territory will be immense after the war, and any successful transition will hinge on Arab support. Although Arab states have signaled their reluctance to deploy large troop contingents, key partners such as Egypt and the UAE may be open to joining an international consortium to support a renewed post-Hamas Gaza—on the clear condition that Israel does not attempt a long-term occupation.

The challenges will be formidable. Whereas Israel will insist on preserving its freedom to intervene militarily should Hamas attempt to reconstitute itself, Arab states could at best acquiesce to such operations but are unlikely to endorse them despite asserting in summer 2025 that Hamas should disarm and play no role in future governance.<sup>180</sup> A further challenge will be phasing in involvement by the Ramallah-based Palestinian Authority given strong opposition from the Netanyahu government. Striking the right balance will be the key—that is, judging when Israel and Arab states can cooperate pragmatically and when domestic political dynamics justify allowing distance. U.S. diplomacy will be critical to prevent postwar Gaza from once again becoming an arena of failure.

#### **FACILITATE ARRANGEMENTS BELOW THE THRESHOLD OF NORMALIZATION**

Such moves will be especially important in preparing the ground for the moment when full normalization becomes possible:

- **Encourage Israel and Lebanon to synchronize expectations around Beirut's commitment to disarm Hezbollah by the end of 2025.** U.S. diplomacy on this issue could help establish a critical piece of a future nonbelligerency agreement. Yet continued Israeli operations risk eroding Lebanese public support for the principle and

strengthening Hezbollah's resistance narrative. In its mediation efforts, the United States must therefore help coordinate Israeli and Lebanese actions in a way that supports their effectiveness while minimizing civilian harm. Targeting Hezbollah's logistical hubs in the northern Beqa Valley, for example, could yield strategic impact without causing broad escalation. Other disarmament moves could follow.

As the United States shepherds this process, it must avoid the fundamental mistake made after the 2006 war, wherein aid provision revived southern Lebanon but allowed Hezbollah to remain armed, thus benefiting Iran.<sup>181</sup> This time, U.S. officials know they must link reconstruction to real disarmament progress, which could lead to border demarcation talks. The United States and Israel have already launched a working group to identify investments that could stabilize southern Lebanon.<sup>182</sup> To reinforce this effort, a major international economic conference involving the United States, France, and Gulf partners is under discussion to mobilize resources aiming at further undermining Hezbollah. The United States should separately encourage Lebanon to consider repealing laws that criminalize contact with Israelis, laying the groundwork for civil society engagement and gradual normalization alongside security coordination.

- **Seek to bridge gaps between Israel and Syria, thus facilitating steps that could amount to a functional nonbelligerency agreement.** Thanks to mediation efforts by Azerbaijan, Israel and Syria have been nearing understandings on military deployments in southern Syria.<sup>183</sup> Moreover, two rounds of direct talks have taken place as of late August 2025 between Syrian Foreign Minister Assad al-Shaibani and Israeli Strategic Affairs Minister Ron Dermer to achieve a security accord. The emerging framework would see Syria dilute its military presence in the south and Israel largely return to the 1974 disengagement lines, withdrawing forces it deployed after the Assad regime's collapse in late 2024.<sup>184</sup> (It remains unclear how Israeli positions on Mount Hermon

would be managed.) A key sticking point involves whether to establish a humanitarian corridor linking Israeli and Syrian Druze communities, which would address fears about the Syrian government's intentions toward this minority group.<sup>185</sup>

President Ahmed al-Sharaa has prioritized securing international funding to rebuild Syria.<sup>186</sup> Accordingly, a security understanding with Israel in southern Syria would be the effective equivalent of a nonbelligerency deal, signaling that Damascus has no interest in reviving the two countries' historic conflict.<sup>187</sup> The Gulf states would view this development favorably, and investment guarantees would likely follow from the United States.<sup>188</sup> Washington would likewise seek to ensure verifiable arrangements to address Israeli security concerns, thus fortifying the framework.

- **Expand Arab-Israel cooperation in AI by supporting the creation of joint research hubs and other tech collaboration.** Both Israel and the UAE seek to be leaders in artificial intelligence. Earlier in 2025, Israel released a national AI strategy and announced a dedicated authority. AI also figured centrally in President Trump's May 2025 visit to Abu Dhabi, during which he backed a proposed deal that would allow the UAE to access advanced chips from Nvidia for building national AI centers along with regional centers serving Asia and Africa.<sup>189</sup> Previous Israel-UAE partnerships via Abu Dhabi's Mohamed bin

Zayed University of Artificial Intelligence could serve as a model for broader U.S.-encouraged partnerships across other Abraham Accords countries. For Gulf states transitioning away from a reliance on fossil fuels, such AI initiatives align with national priorities. For Israel, they reinforce an identity as the region's "start-up nation."

## Conclusion

As the Abraham Accords mark their fifth anniversary, they remain a powerful foundation for a more stable, interconnected Middle East—with U.S. leadership still essential to unlocking their full potential. President Trump has demonstrated an interest in ending conflict and forging peace through creative methods, reinforced by U.S. investment and dealmaking. The prospects discussed in this piece offer fertile ground for outreach in such ways. But challenges also abound—first and foremost, the conundrum of winding down the Gaza war and fostering postwar redevelopment and reconstruction. This is why the U.S. administration must work on multiple fronts, pushing for peace while also advocating cooperative Arab-Israel activity below the level of full normalization, so that when conditions allow, the door will be open to a fuller regional alignment that preserves U.S. interests and enhances prosperity. ❖

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## The Author

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DAVID MAKOVSKY is the Ziegler Distinguished Fellow at The Washington Institute and an adjunct professor of Middle East studies at the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies. In 2013–14, he served in the Office of the Secretary of State as a senior advisor to the Special Envoy on Israeli-Palestinian Negotiations. With Dennis Ross, he coauthored *Be Strong and of Good Courage: How Israel's Most Important Leaders Shaped Its Destiny* (PublicAffairs). His previous Institute studies include *Beyond the Blocs: Jewish Settlement East of Israel's Security Barrier*, and *How to Avert the Slide to a One-State Outcome*.

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