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Israel and the Persian Gulf: A Source of Security or Conflict?

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Executive Summary

- In the current geopolitical context, the Abraham Accords, which normalized Israel's relations with the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain during the final months of the Trump administration, could prove destabilizing by lowering the bar for Israeli military action against Iran.¹
- The destabilizing potential of the Abraham Accords will increase if talks to revive the Iran nuclear agreement collapse. This, in turn, suggests that revival of the accord, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, remains important for U.S. security and regional stability.
- By securing the JCPOA and supporting diplomacy between Iran and Saudi Arabia, the U.S. maximizes the viability and utility of the Abraham Accords as well as their compatibility with a new and more inclusive regional security architecture. But supporting only the Abraham Accords without reentering the JCPOA and encouraging multilateral dialogue among the Arab Gulf states and Iran could transform the accords from a potential strategic asset to a liability.

Introduction

The Abraham Accords, which normalized relations between Israel and the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain, entered into force on September 1, 2020.² Although the two Arab states had engaged with Israel informally in the past, their formal recognition of Israel and exchange of ambassadors constituted a genuine breakthrough. The Trump administration hailed the accords as “the dawn of a new Middle East” — a historically consequential strategic and diplomatic triumph that would bring peace to the region while also transforming it.³ The agreement was also lauded as the holy grail sought by every administration from Reagan's onward, an Israeli–Arab axis to counter Iran. Its

¹ I would like to acknowledge the critical contributions to this brief by two experts, Richard D. Sokolsky and F. Gregory Gause.

² Two other signatories, Morocco and Sudan, are not in the Persian Gulf region.

³ Forgey, Quint. “The Dawn of a New Middle East: Trump Celebrates Abraham Accords with White House Signing Ceremony.” *Politico*, September 15, 2020. <https://www.politico.com/news/2020/09/15/trump-abraham-accords-palestinians-peace-deal-415083>

critics saw it from the outset as nothing more than one of former President Trump's vanity projects – driven by his personality, ego, and politics – that would lead to conflict with Iran.⁴

The truth lay somewhere in between. Israel's first prime minister, David ben-Gurion, expected that it would take the Arab world one hundred years to accept the presence of a sovereign Jewish polity in its midst. He turned out to be remarkably prescient. The period between the first modern Jewish migrations to Ottoman Palestine and the Balfour Declaration preceded the interim between the Camp David Accords and Abraham Accords by about a century. The Abraham Accords represent a tectonic shift, but one in which the plates had been moving slowly over a prolonged period. Nor did the White House signing ceremony on the occasion of the first accord herald a regional transformation. Serious economic, social, political and environmental problems that currently trouble many regional states will be largely unaffected by the Abraham Accords.

The Abraham Accords offer a preview of how the Gulf Arab states may respond to a U.S. drawdown in the region.

From an analytical perspective, the Abraham Accords offer a preview of how the Gulf Arab states may respond to a U.S. drawdown in the region. "Gulf Arab," of course, is an awkward term in this case because it refers only to Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, which is dependent on the Saudis, and the United Arab Emirates. In some circumstances this term could also include Qatar, which was among the first Gulf states to host an Israeli trade delegation nearly 30 years ago (but which has ruled out joining the Abraham Accords owing to sensitivities in the royal family). In the upper Persian Gulf, perceptions of interest differ in part due to domestic constraints. Unlike the UAE, which cannot be said to have a political process or institutions, Kuwait does hold elections, so public

⁴ Izapanahi, Majid. "UAE-Israeli Abraham Accord: The Iran Context." *Eurasia Review*, September 4, 2020. <https://www.eurasiareview.com/04092020-uae-israel-abraham-accord-the-iran-context-analysis/>

opinion matters to the de facto monarchy. Israel is unpopular there, a fact that Kuwait's leadership must take into account and also one that elites largely reflect. For Kuwait, its relationship with Iran, in combination with its large Shiite population, should obviate the anxieties that drive states in the lower Gulf toward ties with Israel, because Kuwaiti Shiites constitute a substantial bloc in favor of cordial ties with Iran. On the other hand, the Kuwaiti Shiite community could provide Iran with opportunities to destabilize the country, a possibility that generates some concern among observers. Oman has successfully leveraged its nonaligned status to increase its diplomatic influence by facilitating contacts between the U.S. and Iran and between Israel and Arab Gulf States. In 2018, Oman hosted Benjamin Netanyahu, Israel's prime minister at the time, and, in 2021, received Mohammad Javad Zarif, the Iranian foreign minister. It is a comfortable position for Muscat, one that minimizes strategic risk for Oman.

Even as the Abraham Accords provide a glimpse of a possible post-American future in the region, the conflict that erupted in May 2021 between Israel and Palestinians in Jerusalem and Hamas in Gaza raised the question of the accords' durability. If, as seems likely, tensions persist between Israel and Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza, Arab signatories of the accords will be vulnerable to domestic opposition to cooperation with Israel on economic or security matters. This could hobble the evolution of an overtly post-American strategic realignment within the region that formally links Israel and Arab Gulf states against Iran. Such a formal arrangement would depend on a relaxation of domestic political constraints within Arab Gulf states, which fighting between Israelis and Palestinians might well work against.

A sober and careful appraisal of the impact of the Abraham Accords on American goals and interests in the Persian Gulf suggests that, while offering some tangible if limited benefits, they might undermine regional stability because the normalization of relations between Israel and the UAE could increase the risk of a conflict between Israel and Iran.⁵ Any such conflict would likely drag in the United States, reversing nascent efforts to

⁵ Macleod, Alan. "Abraham Accord: Experts Warn Trump Peace Deal a Precursor to War." *MintPress News*, October 6, 2020. <https://www.mintpressnews.com/abraham-accord-experts-warn-trump-peace-deal-a-precursor-to-war-with-iran/271799/>

limit America's military footprint in the region. Were Israel to consider a preventive military strike against Iran's nuclear facilities, direct UAE (and Saudi) support for such an operation would increase the likelihood of an Israeli attack and its prospects for success. Such a scenario would be more plausible if current negotiations on a new nuclear accord collapse before Iran's newly elected militant president, Ebrahim Raisi, takes office. America's core interests in the Gulf as currently defined by the Biden administration – maintaining the free flow of oil, combatting terrorism in the region, preserving regional peace and security, and discouraging the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction – could all be adversely affected if the accords provoke rather than deter Iran and trigger an unwanted confrontation.⁶

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Moreover, to the extent that the accords provide the Gulf states with a sense of security, this might diminish their incentives to pursue reconciliation with Iran or a broader regional dialogue to prevent conflict. On the other hand, a deeper and sustained partnership between these countries and Israel could conceivably help contain Iranian military activity within the regional states and potentially lessen the United States' security burden in the region. This would be especially so if Israel became a more important source of weapons, intelligence, and enabling technologies such as artificial intelligence, communications, surveillance, and reconnaissance.

⁶ This assessment of U.S. core interests in the region differs slightly from that of Quincy Institute scholars in an earlier, large-scale study of U.S. Middle East policy, but these differences are fairly nuanced: According to the previous study, "U.S. policy toward the Middle East should be guided by two core objectives: protect people in the United States from attack and facilitate the free flow of global commerce. Both of these objectives are best served by enhancing regional peace and security and preventing a hostile power from taking control of the region's resources or blocking the flow of commerce... The need for stability also generates second-order interests, especially respect for human rights and containing destabilizing refugee flows and terrorism arising from the region's many conflicts." See Pillar, Paul R., Andrew Bacevich, Annette Sheline, and Trita Parsi. "A New U.S. Paradigm for the Middle East: Ending America's Misguided Policy of Domination." *Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft*, July 17, 2020. <https://quincyinst.org/2020/07/17/ending-americas-misguided-policy-of-middle-east-domination/>

A logical conundrum lies at the heart of the Gulf states' risk-reward calculations as they draw closer to Israel. For the UAE, the main impetus for signing the Abraham Accords was the perception that the United States is on a trajectory of withdrawing from the Gulf and it would not be able to rely on Washington to protect it against Iran. This assessment – presumably shared by the Saudis and their other partners in the Gulf Cooperation Council – is probably accurate. At the same time, Israel and the UAE have different objectives in signing the accords. The Israelis hope to use them to threaten and, if they deem it necessary, to execute a military attack on Iran's nuclear facilities. The Emiratis, while they share the Israeli objective of containing Iran, view the accords chiefly as a way to improve their image in Washington and reap the economic, military, and technological benefits of closer relations with Israel. These include acquisition of advanced combat aircraft from the United States, which would entail continued U.S. cooperation despite an overall shift toward commitments in Asia. Emirati aspirations along these lines do not necessarily square with likely Israeli expectations of UAE support for military operations against Iran. An Israeli war with Iran staged all or in part from Emirati installations could cause serious blowback for the UAE's security and well-being. Presumably, UAE leaders aim to garner the benefits of a close relationship with Israel without exposing the Emirates to the risk inherent in wartime cooperation against Iran. This could prove to be a high-wire balancing act.

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To the degree that this is an accurate assessment, the drivers of the Abraham Accords will be reinforced by the reality rather than the expectation of U.S. withdrawal. As the horizon of a postulated U.S. departure draws nearer, barring countervailing developments, the Abraham Accords could encompass Saudi Arabia as well,

formalizing and perhaps deepening existing tacit cooperation. The consensus view among observers, however, is that Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, who sees ties to Israel in the context of a vast restructuring of the Saudi economy, will be blocked from formalizing cooperation with Israel as long as his father, King Salman, a more sympathetic observer of the Palestinian cause, occupies the throne. In the event of a U.S. withdrawal and persistent tensions between Iran and Abraham Accord signatories, internal contradictions might make the accords unsustainable, let alone expandable to Saudi Arabia.

Much would depend on the benefits that Saudis and Emiratis see in stabilizing relations with Iran. China, an important economic player, is certainly nudging them in this direction.⁷ An early indicator will be evident as the Saudis and Emiratis make known their respective policies toward the Biden administration's effort to reenter the 2015 JCPOA, which appears to be predicated on compliance-for-compliance. If Riyadh and Abu Dhabi decide to back the administration's plan, while Israel continues to insist that a return to the JCPOA could trigger Israeli military action, the strategic dimension of the Abraham Accord will be much diminished. For the moment, the new Israeli prime minister, Naftali Bennett, has pledged to "consult closely" with the Biden administration on Iran.⁸

The geopolitical context

What is old?

The earliest covert contacts between Israel and the UAE date to the early 1990s and the Oslo Accords.⁹ These discussions were given a boost in 2008–09, when Tzipi Livni, Israel's foreign minister at the time, established a dialogue with her UAE counterpart — a

⁷ Burton, Guy. "Is China Angling for a Saudi–Iranian détente?" East Asia Forum, May 28, 2021.

<https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2021/05/28/is-china-angling-for-a-saudi-iranian-detente/>.

⁸ Hauser, Michael Tov, and Ben Samuels. "Bennett, Biden Speak Two Hours After Swearing-in, Agree to 'Consult Closely' on Iran." *Haaretz*, June 13, 2021.

<https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/elections/.premium-bennett-biden-speak-two-hours-after-swearing-in-agree-to-consult-closely-on-iran-1.9902143>.

⁹ "Exposed: Secret Israel–UAE Normalization Talks Date Back to 1990s." *Middle East Monitor*, June 12, 2018.

<https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20180612-exposed-secret-israel-uae-normalisation-talks-date-back-to-1990s/>

back channel the two sides maintained for many years.¹⁰ Israel's engagement with the UAE focused on economic matters — promotion of trade, investment, commerce, and tourism, and also cooperation on water security and agricultural production — as well as on security issues.¹¹ These contacts have continued over the past several years in parallel with the development of the security relationship. They were broadened to include telecommunications infrastructure as well as sports diplomacy and cooperation on Covid-19 research and other medical projects.¹²

Israel's covert talks with the GCC states were not limited to the UAE. There have also been reports over the years of covert Israeli-Saudi planning for attacks on Iran's nuclear facilities, and others suggesting that Riyadh had agreed to allow Israel to use its airspace and bases to stage drone, rescue, and refueling operations.¹³ These reports have never been confirmed, but it would not be surprising if Israeli-Saudi contingency planning had been conducted by way of intelligence channels. Indeed, some Iran experts think Tehran has long operated on the assumption that Israel, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE have been engaged in covert cooperation for years, and thus dismiss the notion that normalization will be a "game changer."¹⁴

What is new?

A U.S. military withdrawal from the region, should it materialize, will reaffirm Israeli, Emirati, and Saudi perceptions of their strategic situation and of the wisdom of cooperation. Yet the gains from cooperation were in large measure achieved under the tacit security regime that had evolved during the preceding decades. Over time, however, the domestic political constraints of an acknowledged relationship with Israel diminished, as the so-called Arab consensus was eroded by Egyptian and Jordanian

¹⁰ Gilani, Iftikhar. "Analysis — UAE, Israel Develop Discreet Ties Under UN Agency Cover." Anadolu Agency, August 19, 2020. <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/analysis/analysis-uae-israel-develop-discreet-ties-under-un-agency-cover/1946710>

¹¹ al-Amir, Khitam. "UAE and Israel Discuss Cooperation in Food and Water Security." *Gulf News*, August 30, 2020. <https://gulfnews.com/uae/government/uae-and-israel-discuss-cooperation-in-food-and-water-security-1.73526274>

¹² "Sports Diplomacy Flourishing Between Israel and the UAE." *All Israel News*, December 15, 2020; Noa Landau. "UAE, Israel Companies Sign Coronavirus Research Agreement." *Haaretz*, August 16, 2020.

<https://www.allisrael.com/sports-diplomacy-flourishing-between-israel-and-the-uae>

¹³ "Sunday Times: Israel, Saudi Arabia Cooperating to Plan Possible Iran Attack." *Haaretz*, April 10, 2018.

<https://www.haaretz.com/israel-saudis-now-allies-on-iran-1.5291205>

¹⁴ "Iran: UAE-Israel deal a 'stab in the back' to Muslims." *Al Jazeera*, August 20, 2020.

<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/8/14/iran-uae-israel-deal-a-stab-in-the-back-to-muslims>

peace treaties with Israel and tentative steps toward de facto recognition of Israel taken during the heyday of the Oslo Accords.

A U.S. military withdrawal from the region, should it materialize, will reaffirm Israeli, Emirati, and Saudi perceptions of their strategic situation and of the wisdom of cooperation.

A demographic transition in the Gulf resulting in a disproportionately large cohort of young citizen-subjects born long after pivotal events — the wars of 1948, 1956, 1967, 1969–70, 1973, and 1982 — and were in their infancy during the al-Aqsa intifada (2000–2005) and the 2006 Lebanon war. Generalizations can be dangerous, especially in the wake of the Gaza war of 2021, but polling data and informal surveys of social media before the conflict suggested that young adults in the wealthy Gulf states were not, by and large, concerned with or sympathetic to Palestinians in the West Bank or Gaza. Whether and how the war of 2021 influenced these attitudes and how durable changes prove to be remain to be seen. This is also true of Israel's cachet among this population, which aspires to participate in a globalized, technology-driven economy. As these internal and external barriers to normalization have weakened, incentives to strengthen ties have grown, especially in the areas of investment, finance, and technology transfer. Opportunities for direct investment in Israel's technology sector are considerable, as is the appetite for such investments among the Gulf's sovereign wealth funds and venture capitalists.

Perceptions of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict

Demographic change, the social composition of elites in the UAE and Saudi Arabia, exposure to Western, particularly American influence, declining familiarity with Modern Standard Arabic, geographic distance from the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, the greater resonance of Israel's technological dominance, a predisposition to admire strength while deriding weakness and victimization — these trends have all contributed to a

change in attitude toward the conflict.¹⁵ How these views play out in coming years will determine the durability and potential of ties between Israel and the Arab states. At this juncture, the jury is out. Apart from the unreliability of polling in the UAE and Saudi Arabia, the data reflect contradictory attitudes toward recognition of and cooperation with Israel. Attitudes differ among Gulf state populations. Positive views seem to be more prominent in the UAE than elsewhere, although this assertion rests more on anecdotal observation than on systematic analysis of large sample sets. Opinion surveys are available, although, as noted, many area specialists question the utility of polling in Saudi Arabia and the UAE. A 2020 poll in Saudi Arabia conducted on behalf of the pro-Israel Washington Institute for Near East Policy logged modest approval ratings of 40 percent in favor of Saudi ties to Israel for firms or individuals who wish to pursue them and for the Abraham Accords.¹⁶ These findings align with a recent Zogby Research survey that addressed this issue (among many others).¹⁷ James Zogby, managing director of Zogby Research Services, was puzzled and dismayed by its findings.¹⁸

In contrast, Arab social media, according to an informal study by Kristin Diwan, a scholar of Persian Gulf politics, as well as the findings of an Israeli government report, reflect strong opposition to the Abraham Accords among Arab youth.¹⁹ In general, Middle Eastern Arabs do not favor diplomatic recognition of Israel.²⁰ The gist of their critique of the Abraham Accords is that they betray the Palestinian cause. This view is naturally promoted by Palestinian social media users, whose posts are recirculated in a positive feedback loop. On the other hand, the Arab Youth Survey, a respected

¹⁵ Modern Standard Arabic had contributed to pan-Arabic perspectives on key issues, while the emerging lingua franca is English. See Salman, Sabah Salman. "Is Standard Arabic Dying?" *Arab World English Journal*, vol.6., no.2, June 2015. 54–65.

https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2834376.

¹⁶ Pollock, David. "New Saudi Poll Shows Sharp Rise in Support for Israel Ties." *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, December 8 2020.

<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/correction-new-saudi-poll-shows-sharp-rise-support-israel-ties-despite-caveats>.

¹⁷ Zogby, James. "Debate: Attitudes in Israel and Key Arab States." Zogby Research Services, July 2020.

<https://static1.squarespace.com/static/52750dd3e4b08c252c723404/t/5f7dbd0f49f01a0aa9ccec15/1602075922724/Annexation+Update+v1.pdf>.

¹⁸ Zogby, James. "Don't Shoot the Messenger." *Responsible Statecraft*. August 23, 2020.

<https://responsiblestatecraft.org/2020/08/23/dont-shoot-the-messenger/>

¹⁹ Diwan, Kristin Smith. "Public Debate Over the Abraham Accords Reflects Range of Views on Normalization in the Gulf." *The Arab Gulf States Institute*, Aug 24, 2020.

<https://agsiw.org/public-debate-over-the-abraham-accords-reflects-range-of-views-on-normalization-in-the-gulf/>; "Israel-UAE deal: Vast majority of Arab social media posts on pact negative, says report." *Middle East Eye*, October 12, 2020.

<https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/israel-uae-deal-bahrain-arab-social-media-against-normalisation>.

²⁰ El Kurd, Dana. "What do ordinary Arabs think about normalizing relations with Israel?" *Washington Post*, Oct. 26, 2020.

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2020/10/26/what-do-ordinary-arabs-think-about-normalizing-relations-with-israel/>.

longitudinal poll of Arab youth opinion, shows clearly that the UAE exercises tremendous soft power throughout the region. It is seen as the state to emulate and, more important, as a desirable place to live and work.²¹ This would suggest that a continued UAE commitment to the Abraham Accords could have a positive effect on the attitudes of Arab youth over time. It is possible, however, that, in the context of continued conflict between Israelis and Palestinians, the UAE's commitment to the Abraham Accords might erode its soft power. In the meantime, UAE authorities have striven to portray the Abraham Accords as an economic arrangement that will widen horizons for young Emiratis and benefit the UAE business community. Security cooperation is not part of the domestic discussion.²²

Mohammed bin Salman is reported to be eager to normalize ties with Israel and took the unprecedented step of meeting with Netanyahu in 2020 at Neom, Saudi Arabia.

There are signs of change in the Saudi kingdom, as well. The popularity of the Saudi television series *Um Haroun*, which depicts intercommunal ties between Muslims and Jews in the kingdom during the 1940s and 1950s, is probably as good a proxy for survey data about changing attitudes as observers are likely to get.²³ As a limited openness to Jews and Israel becomes discernible, attitudes toward Palestinians have soured. Prince Bandar bin Sultan, the former Saudi ambassador to the United States, best expressed the change, remarking acidly, "The Palestinian cause is a just cause, but its advocates are failures, and the Israeli cause is unjust, but its advocates have proven to be successful. There is something that successive Palestinian leadership share in common: They always bet on a losing side, and that has a price."²⁴ Mohammed bin

²¹ "A Voice for Change." Arab Youth Survey, 12th annual edition, 2020.

https://www.arabyouthsurvey.com/pdf/downloadwhitepaper/AYS%202020-WP_ENG_0510_Single-Final.pdf.

²² Zaken, Danny. "Israel, Emirates strive for warm, vibrant, business-profitable peace." *Al-Monitor*, March 3, 2021.

<https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2021/03/israel-united-arab-emirates-bahrain-oman-saudi-arabia.html>

²³ Hubbard, Ben. "Jewish Characters Star in Saudi TV Show, Igniting an Arab Debate." *The New York Times*, September 2, 2020.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/02/world/middleeast/saudi-arabia-um-haroun-jews.html>.

²⁴ Trofimov, Yaroslav. "The Gulf Arabs Weary of Protesting for Palestine." *The Wall Street Journal*, Oct. 9, 2020.

<https://www.wsj.com/articles/the-gulf-arabs-weary-of-protesting-for-palestine-11602251852>.

Salman is reported to be eager to normalize ties with Israel and took the unprecedented step of meeting with Netanyahu in 2020 at Neom, Saudi Arabia.²⁵ Even if a large margin of error is factored into the 2018 Arab Youth Survey, his astonishing popularity with Saudi youth — 91 percent of whom supported his appointment as crown prince, 97 percent judged him to be a strong leader, and 90 percent believing he would move the country in the right direction — suggests that there would be some support for, or least acquiescence to, a move toward normalization following a royal succession.²⁶ It is possible, of course, that the attitudes reflected in this survey have at this point changed, given the events of the intervening three years.

The UAE still sees some value in being perceived as a champion of the Palestinian cause, as its ambassador to the United States indicated when he justified the Abraham Accords upon their establishment as a barrier to Israeli annexation of the West Bank.²⁷ Netanyahu's view at the time appeared to differ: "There is no change in my plan to apply our sovereignty in Judea and Samaria, in full coordination with the United States. I am committed, it has not changed."²⁸ Whether future Israeli governments share this commitment will hinge on the way they balance the interests of business elites, who stand to gain from trade and investment made possible by regional integration, and the interests of settler constituencies.

What do the Gulf states want from Israel?

The primary drivers of the Gulf states' interest in relations with Israel are related to security, geopolitical factors, political calculation, and economic expectations. They are not of equal weight, of course, but taken together they are compelling.

²⁵ Hendrix, Steve, Shira Rubin, and Souad Mekhennet. "Israeli prime minister makes historic visit to Saudi Arabia, intelligence official confirms." *Washington Post*, November 23, 2020. https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/israeli-prime-minister-visits-saudi-arabia-meets-with-crown-prince-and-pompeo-say-local-media/2020/11/23/63f3cab4-2d5f-11eb-9dd6-2d0179981719_story.html.

²⁶ "A Decade of Hopes and Fears." Arab Youth Survey White Paper, 2018. <http://www.arabyouthsurvey.com/pdf/whitepaper/en/2018-AYS-White-Paper.pdf>.

²⁷ Ayyub, Rami. "In rare appeal to Israeli public, UAE warns against annexation." Reuters, June 12, 2020. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-israel-palestinians-annexation-emirat/in-rare-appeal-to-israeli-public-uae-warns-against-annexation-idUSKBN23J0ZT>.

²⁸ al-Mughrabi, Nidal, and Dan Williams. "Stop or suspend West Bank annexation? Devil in the detail for Israel-UAE deal." Reuters, September 2, 2020. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-israel-emirates-usa-communique/stop-or-suspend-west-bank-annexation-devil-in-the-detail-for-israel-uae-deal-idUSKBN25T2FE>.

External Security

The security factor prompting the Gulf states to look toward Israel derives primarily from their shared hostility toward Iran and their perception that the Islamic Republic poses a threat.²⁹ The Gulf states hope to leverage Israel's sophisticated military technology, weapons, and equipment to expand defense cooperation and improve their defenses against Iranian military aggression.³⁰ Israel's excellence in artificial intelligence, cyberoperations, defenses against air and missile attacks, and military training and tactics can help the Gulf states redress shortfalls in these areas. More important, the Arab Gulf states see Israel as a potential partner should they determine that the evolution of the Iranian threat warrants cooperation to counter this threat with military force – in other words, a plan B if the JCPOA cannot be reconstituted as initially negotiated, lengthened or strengthened, or if the threats posed by Iran's ballistic missile programs and regional activities cannot be eliminated or reduced.

Domestic Security

The Gulf states also hope to leverage their relationship with Israel to help them deal with domestic security problems. Israel, the UAE, and Saudi Arabia all share an enmity toward the Muslim Brotherhood. In the case of Israel, this means keeping the lid on Hamas; for the Saudis and the Emiratis, it means weakening the Muslim Brotherhood, not only in their own countries but across the region. This shared threat perception has established a solid foundation for intelligence sharing on the activities of local chapters of the brotherhood, its proxies, and its affiliates. It also gives the Emiratis and the Saudis a powerful incentive to gain access to Israel's domestic surveillance and monitoring technologies to keep tabs on the threat of brotherhood-inspired extremism throughout the Gulf and on other internal enemies, real or imagined.³¹

²⁹ Vonderhaar, Lora. "The Abraham Accords: A Peace Deal in Name Only." *Georgetown Security Studies Review*, October 23, 2020. <https://georgetownsecuritystudiesreview.org/2020/10/23/the-abraham-accords-a-peace-deal-in-name-only/>

³⁰ Barrington, Lisa, and Dan Williams. "UAE, Israel Defense Ministers Pledge Defense Cooperation." Reuters, August 24, 2020. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-israel-emirates-defence/uae-israeli-ministers-pledge-defence-cooperation-idUSKBN25L1XP>

³¹ Rahman, Omar H. "What's Behind the Relationship Between Israel and Arab Gulf States?" Brookings Institution, January 28, 2019. <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2019/01/28/whats-behind-the-relationship-between-israel-and-arab-gulf-states/>

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Geopolitics

The UAE, Saudis, and the other GCC states view relationship building with Israel as a hedge against declining U.S. interest in the greater Middle East. There is a widespread expectation among the Arab Gulf states that a U.S. retrenchment in the region will leave them more exposed to Iran. Not surprisingly, to fill the geopolitical vacuum left by the expected disengagement of their longstanding protector, the Gulf states are seeking refuge under an Israeli security umbrella, planning for the “day after” America puts the Persian Gulf in its military’s rearview mirror. But they also expect that any Israeli operation against Iran will implicate the United States militarily in the conflict. The UAE and Israel also share an interest in countering Turkey’s activism under President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. Since signing the Abraham Accords, the UAE and Israel have flown side-by-side in military exercises Greece sponsored in 2021.³² Such exercises involving both Israel and the UAE were already taking place in 2016 elsewhere.³³

Repairing political reputations

During Trump’s term in office, the Saudis and the UAE sustained a loss of reputation in Congress, especially but not only among Democrats, and with the American public because of the suffering caused by their military campaign in Yemen and domestic human rights abuses; this damage now influences perceptions within the Biden administration.³⁴ By cultivating deeper ties with Israel, the Gulf Arab states hope to refurbish their tarnished image. Democratic progressives in Congress, however, are

³² Bowman, Bryan, and Ryan Brobst. “The Niochos military exercise in Greece is bad news for Iran.” *Defense News*, April 30, 2021. <https://www.defensenews.com/opinion/commentary/2021/04/30/the-iniochos-military-exercise-in-greece-is-bad-news-for-iran/>.

³³ “Israel, UAE and Pakistan participate in military exercises.” *Middle East Eye*, September 2, 2016. <https://www.middleeasteye.net/fr/news/israel-uae-and-pakistan-participate-military-exercises-us-421373309>.

³⁴ DeYoung, Karen. “Biden Administration Places Hold on Weapons Sales to UAE, Saudi Arabia.” *Washington Post*, January 27, 2021. https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/biden-weapons-sales-saudi-uae/2021/01/27/f230bdc4-60e4-11eb-afbe-9a11a127d146_story.html

unlikely to be impressed. But bilateral relations with the UAE are in flux; a post-Netanyahu political dispensation might yield better ties between Israel, the administration and the Democratic Party, which in turn would probably help rehabilitate the UAE's reputation. The coalition constituting the new government is fragile, however, and could be replaced in the foreseeable future by a more purely right-of-center coalition that would rekindle U.S.–Israeli disputes over treatment of Palestinians or Iran's nuclear program.

Economic and technology cooperation

Because of its oil wealth, the UAE does not need Israeli foreign assistance, loans, or other forms of capital investment. But it does need assistance in certain “niche areas,” including management of water resources and agricultural production in desert climates. Closer UAE–Israeli ties will also be good for business in other ways.³⁵ The UAE, for example, aspires to establish a larger global role as an arms supplier and views enhanced bilateral cooperation in developing its defense industries as a means to fulfill this ambition.³⁶ This has been a longstanding goal of the UAE, as demonstrated in its annual International Defence Exhibition and Conference events, which it bills as “the most strategically important tri-service defense exhibition in the world.”³⁷ The UAE also has plans to invest in Israel's advanced IT sector to support the Emiratis' shift to an information-age economy and, with U.S. prodding, to reduce Israel's dependence on Chinese foreign investment in its high-tech sector.³⁸

What does Israel want from the Gulf states?

Three potent factors drive Israel's interest in relations with the Arab Gulf states.

³⁵ Bowen, Jeremy. “Five Reasons Why Israel's Peace Deals with the UAE and Bahrain Matter.” BBC News, September 15, 2020. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-54151712>

³⁶ Cohen, Naomi. “The UAE Is Turning into the World Capital for Weapons Makers.” *Foreign Policy*, October 20, 2020. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/10/20/the-uae-is-turning-into-the-world-capital-for-weapons-makers/>

³⁷ Helou, Agnes. “What kind of industrial cooperation will improved Israel–UAE relations produce?” *Defense News*, September 2, 2020. <https://www.defensenews.com/global/mideast-africa/2020/08/26/what-kind-of-industrial-cooperation-will-improved-israel-uae-relations-produce/>; <https://idexuae.ae/idex/about-idex/>.

³⁸ Harkov, Lahav. “Does the US See UAE Ties as a Way to Curb Chinese Investments in Israel?” *The Jerusalem Post*, October 21, 2020. <https://www.jpost.com/israel-news/does-the-us-see-uae-ties-as-a-way-to-curb-chinese-investments-in-israel-646453>

Legitimacy and regional cover on the Palestinian issue

Relations with the Gulf states were thought to be a useful form of pressure on Palestinians to negotiate final-status issues on terms more favorable to Israel's perceived interests.

Israelis want to be accepted as part of the West and have long valued U.S. and European relations for this purpose. Ties in Western European capitals, where Muslim voters have a degree of clout and sympathy for the Palestinians remain a feature of left-of-center politics, tend to strengthen or weaken according to events. In recent years, the Netanyahu government forged ties to quasi-authoritarian states in Eastern Europe as well as southern flank countries, especially Greece. But Israelis have also wanted Israel to be considered a Middle Eastern country, one whose presence would be regarded as unexceptional by Arab states within the regional interstate system. While Syria and Iraq remain out of reach, changes elsewhere in the Arab world, especially in the Gulf region, opened doors to Israel's government and business sector. Apart from mitigating Israel's regional diplomatic isolation and opening up trade opportunities with wealthy oil exporters, relations with the Gulf states were thought to be a useful form of pressure on Palestinians to negotiate final-status issues on terms more favorable to Israel's perceived interests. As Jared Kushner explained, such relations would put the Palestinians in the "penalty box" and, by discouraging their hope of regional support, persuade them to lower their expectations, so improving prospects for an agreement with Israel (framed by the Trump administration as "Peace to Prosperity: A Vision to Improve the Lives of the Palestinian and Israeli People"). But most observers were quick to judge this approach counterproductive because it failed to address Palestinian political concerns. And the May 2021 confrontations in Jerusalem and Israel's "mixed cities" and the 11-day war with Hamas showed that Kushner's critics were correct.

Potential support for large-scale conventional operations against Iran

Given Israel's current capabilities, sustained, coordinated operations against targets on Iranian territory would be too difficult without reliable access to regional bases. Positive relations with the Gulf states are key to such access over the long run and therefore key to Israel's ability to threaten Iran and offset the threat Iran poses to Israel by virtue of its relationship with Lebanese Hezbollah. Close relations would also formalize and deepen intelligence sharing arrangements.

Revenue from increased tourism, investment, commerce, and weapons sales

According to economists at the RAND Corporation, assuming that trade arrangements remain bilateral, Israel will accrue \$46 billion over 10 years, boosting its projected GDP by 2.3 percent, creating nearly 20,000 jobs and reducing estimated unemployment by more than a percentage point.³⁹ Israel's gains will increase if trade arrangements are multilateral, or, as one might expect, if the number of signatories to the Abraham Accords increases over time. The technology and weapons sectors could generate larger revenues for Israel and the UAE in particular.

What does the U.S. want out of the new Israeli–Gulf states relationship?

The Biden administration has signaled its desire to disengage from the Persian Gulf, but it does not want China or Russia to assume its role as regional security guarantor. Moreover, during the past two years the sale of sophisticated U.S. weapons to the UAE and Saudi Arabia has become more politically controversial. In both these areas, Washington might wish Israel to take on some of the security burdens that the United

³⁹ Egel, Daniel, Shira Efron, and Linda Robinson. "Peace Dividend: Widening the Economic Growth and Development Benefits of the Abraham Accords." RAND Corporation, 2021. <https://www.rand.org/pubs/perspectives/PEA1149-1.html>.

States has historically assumed, while giving the administration some influence over security-related decisions taken by Israel and its Gulf partners. In addition, to the extent that Israel develops more robust military-to-military ties with the Gulf states – for example, through combined training, exercises, contingency planning, and transfers of arms and technology – it will help achieve the longstanding U.S. goal of creating a more integrated and effective collective defense capability among GCC member states. It remains to be seen, however, how much Israel’s concerns about the leakage or theft of its technology will limit its appetite for selling sensitive military systems.

Implications

Iranian threat perceptions

Tehran probably views the Abraham Accords as a grave threat: They bring together two of Iran’s geopolitical and ideological foes – Israel and the UAE, with Saudi Arabia just offstage – in a U.S.–engineered alignment to further encircle Iran and constrain its regional aspirations.⁴⁰ The accords, and an end to the Arab–Israeli animosity that had served as a buffer against an Israeli foothold in the Gulf, will exacerbate Iranian fears that Israel, aided by the Islamic Republic’s Gulf state adversaries, could pose an existential threat to the survival not only of its nuclear program but of the government itself. Revolutionary Iran has had a presence on Israel’s northern border since the 1980s due to the Lebanon War of 1982–84, while Israel has not had a corresponding presence adjacent to Iran. The Abraham Accords could remove Iran’s asymmetric advantage by establishing a military presence on Iran’s maritime perimeter. It is not surprising, therefore, that Israeli–UAE normalization was met with shrill warnings from Iran that the Emiratis will pay a price for their “stab in the back.”⁴¹

⁴⁰ Behraves, Maysam, and Hamidreza Azizi. “Israel’s Peace Deals Are a Strategic Nightmare for Iran.” *Foreign Policy*, September 14, 2020. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/09/14/israels-peace-deals-are-a-strategic-nightmare-for-iran/>

⁴¹ Behraves and Azizi. “Israel’s Peace Deals.”

At a time when the Gulf states and Iran should be looking for ways to lower tensions, the accords could discourage Tehran from pursuing its current talks with Riyadh or engaging in future regional dialogue.

But rather than wrong-foot the Iranians and coerce Tehran into altering its assertive policies and behavior, the accords and continued improvement in Israeli–Saudi relations could produce the opposite effect. They could provoke the Iranian leadership to dig in its heels, accelerate development of more advanced ballistic missiles, and step up its subversion in Sunni Arab states and support for proxy forces in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, and Yemen. And by offering Israel an enhanced strategic relationship with the UAE, the accords may push Iran toward a nuclear weapons program, to modernize its conventional forces, and to engage in continued cyberattacks in the Gulf. At a time when, from the U.S. perspective, the Gulf states and Iran should be looking for ways to lower tensions and de-escalate their conflict, the accords could discourage Tehran from pursuing its current talks with Riyadh or engaging in any future regional dialogue on conflict prevention and confidence building.⁴²

This, however, is conjecture rather than destiny. Saudi Arabia and Iran have long engaged in cyclical periods of tension and reconciliation.⁴³ Although they were at odds during the Iran–Iraq war, when Saudi aircraft downed Iranian fighters, and when, in 1987, mayhem involving Iranian hajjis in Mecca killed or wounded hundreds of pilgrims and Saudis, the two sides were aligned against Iraq when it invaded Kuwait in 1990. Energy market dynamics have generally forced Iran and Saudi Arabia to interact constructively. In May 1997, a year after Iran’s attack via proxy against the U.S. Air Force installation at al–Khobar, Mohammad Khatami, Iran’s just-elected president, embarked on a charm offensive that included a meeting with King Fahd. The two countries committed to

⁴² Gordon, Philip A. “The Next Administration Needs a Plan for De-escalation in the Gulf.” *Foreign Policy*, October 22, 2020; “Iran confirms talks with Saudi Arabia, promises best efforts.” Reuters, May 10, 2021.

<https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/iran-confirms-talks-with-saudi-arabia-promises-best-efforts-2021-05-10/>.

⁴³ Gause, Gregory. “Saudi–Iranian Rapprochement?” Brookings Institution, March 17, 2014.

<https://www.brookings.edu/articles/saudi-iranian-rapprochement-the-incentives-and-the-obstacles/>.

“noninterference in each other’s internal affairs, respect for national sovereignty and independence and peaceful coexistence derived from the ties of religion and heritage which bind the states of the region.” Later that year, Saudi Crown Prince Abdullah participated in a summit meeting of the Organization of the Islamic Conference (now the Organization of Islamic Cooperation), where the Saudi delegation asserted that “if the two governments have the political will, there are no limits to cooperation with Iran.” Prior to Mohammed bin Salman’s accession to de facto rule in Saudi Arabia and the kingdom’s rivalry with Iran over the Yemen conflict, in which the two states split regarding Iran’s support for the Houthis, cross–Gulf relations were fairly stable.

Israel’s assessment of its options vis-à-vis Iran

The Abraham Accords could expand Israel’s military options with regard to Iran. This will depend principally on whether the “special security arrangement” invoked in 2021 by Benny Gantz, Israel’s defense minister at the time, includes base access and in-theater staging for Israeli forces and military operations.⁴⁴ UAE port facilities, especially at Jebel Ali and Fujairah on the Gulf of Oman, could accommodate Israeli naval assets, while its airbases, which were designed to accommodate USAF operations, would easily support Israeli air operations, as well as the use of Israeli ground forces in Iran. These facilities could also enable the prepositioning of Israeli equipment, munitions, and other materiel essential to sustained operations in the Persian Gulf.

The long distance between Israeli airfields and targets in Iran, particularly the nuclear-related installations at Fordow and Natanz and leadership and command-and-control targets in Tehran, has been the main risk factor in Israeli operational contingency plans. The tyranny of distance has required extensive aerial refueling operations, which would require defense against attack, and extreme demands on aircrews. The least challenging of the available air routes, the so-called middle path, required the consent or acquiescence of Saudi Arabia and the UAE, neither of which

⁴⁴ Williams, Dan. “Israeli defence chief sees ‘special security arrangement’ with Gulf states.” Reuters, March 2, 2021. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-israel-gulf/israeli-defence-chief-sees-special-security-arrangement-with-gulf-states-idUSKCN2AU1PW>.

could be absolutely relied upon. A “special security arrangement” that entailed access, prepositioning, staging, and overflight, however, would remove much of the operational risk associated with a sustained air campaign against Iran, especially if Israel were to deploy its own air-defense systems adjacent to bases it was staging from. Operating from the UAE, the Israeli Air Force could maintain high sortie rates and carry out search-and-rescue operations as necessary. Given these conditions and UAE consent, the bar to an Israeli move against Iran would be considerably lower than it is today.

To the extent that Saudi Arabia chooses to formalize ties with Israel, perhaps after King Salman relinquishes the throne and the crown prince assumes de jure control over the kingdom, Israel would welcome access to Saudi naval installations along the Red Sea coast, especially the al-Qadima naval port and the King Faisal Naval Base at Jeddah.⁴⁵

The presence of Israeli forces in the UAE would quickly become public knowledge. Presumably, Emirati authorities would have taken this into account before inviting an Israeli deployment. The UAE is a tightly controlled state. Domestic surveillance is relatively pervasive. Whether the social base for a close relationship between the UAE and Israel eventually solidifies is an open question, perhaps even for the UAE government, which presides over a diverse country that includes Salafists in al-Ain and Iranians in Dubai. The Egyptian and Jordanian publics have never accepted the peace treaties between their countries and Israel and prefer a cold peace to a warm one.

The Arab side of the Gulf, of course, is much more remote, and anti-Israeli sentiment is less intense. And despite overall disapproval for the Abraham Accords, there is a noticeable trend toward public acceptance of bilateral relations with Israel. Eruptions of Israeli-Palestinian violence will disrupt this trend but probably not reverse it. This, of course, is a speculative judgment. Should Israel annex the West Bank, expel the Palestinian population, or inflict mass casualties on Palestinians in suppressing a third intifada, the Abraham Accords might well prove unviable.

⁴⁵ “Revealed: Israel, UAE to enhance military cooperation in the Red Sea.” *Middle East Monitor*, August 19, 2020.
<https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20200819-revealed-israel-uae-to-enhance-military-cooperation-in-the-red-sea/>.

Impact on U.S. interests

Greater cooperation between Israel and the Gulf Arab states will create less incentive for these countries to seek an accommodation with Iran or to support a new nuclear agreement.

As long as the Abraham Accords do not precipitate a conflict between Israel and Iran, they are not likely to have a major impact on U.S. core interests in the region. But all bets are off if the accords create greater maneuvering room for Israeli military attacks on Iran, which could trigger Iranian terrorist activities against the Gulf states and Israel or efforts to disrupt the flow of Persian Gulf oil — and push Iran toward acquiring nuclear weapons. Further, greater cooperation between Israel and the Gulf Arab states will create less incentive for these countries to seek an accommodation with Iran or to support a new nuclear agreement. This said, the accords represent a viable plan B if 1) efforts to reconstitute the JCPOA and constrain the Iranian ballistic missile program and regional assertiveness fail, and 2) Israel, enabled by military cooperation with the UAE and Saudi Arabia and faced with the absence of U.S. support for preventive military attacks against Iran, decides to take matters into its own hands.

The realignment promised by the Abraham Accords could prove destabilizing if tensions between Israel and Arab Gulf states on one side and Iran on the other persist, particularly in the absence of a United States presence. Arguably, the U.S. could put the brakes on an escalation of Israeli–Iranian conflict involving the UAE without a presence on the ground. On the other hand, such a presence could provide early warning of escalation and military-to-military channels that facilitate crisis communication. In any event, the question is whether the U.S. can help mold the implementation of the Abraham Accords in a way that facilitates a stabilizing regional security architecture.

As long as Iran, on the one hand, and Israel, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE on the other perceive each other as threats, the Abraham Accords and a new and more inclusive regional security architecture – one designed to create a collective security framework for enhancing stability and preventing conflict in the Persian Gulf – are incompatible. The enmity between Saudi Arabia and Iran lies at the root of this problem, and until these two enemies reach a durable accommodation a new security architecture that includes Iran (and Iraq) will be held hostage to their toxic relationship, and to poor U.S.–Iranian relations. And because the UAE shares this enmity toward Iran, though perhaps to a lesser extent, and the other Gulf states are too weak to oppose the Saudis and the Emiratis even though they have better relations with Iran, there is no prospect for progress toward a new regional security architecture.

While the off-ramp to de-escalation now seems to be closed, there is potential for greater Israeli–Gulf state cooperation in combating transnational threats such as climate change, pandemics, and illicit trafficking in drugs and arms, and also for dealing with economic challenges in areas where Israeli expertise and experience could make a major contribution. The off-ramp, in any case, might not be closed forever, or even for very much longer. As noted, both the UAE and Saudi Arabia are talking to Tehran.⁴⁶ Iran's incoming president, Ebrahim Raisi, has said that the repair of relations with Arab neighbors would be a top priority. And it remains possible that a more centrist government in Israel, if it gains traction, might accommodate the U.S. approach to Iran's nuclear program and nudge the Abraham Accords toward compatibility with a durable future regional security arrangement.

⁴⁶ See Ayesh, Mohammad. "Arabic press review: UAE and Iran reportedly engaged in secret talks." *Middle East Eye*, January 4, 2021. <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/iran-uae-secret-communication-arab-press>; Trita Parsi. "Why Mohammed bin Salman Suddenly Wants to Talk to Iran." *Foreign Policy*, April 29, 2021. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/04/29/saudi-arabia-iran-uae-mohammed-bin-salman-secret-talks-biden-withdrawal-pivot-middle-east/>.

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