The Abraham Accords constitute the beginning of a transformation of a region that has confounded many, and that will continue to be a vital battleground astride the security and economic interests of world powers. American leadership was a necessary but alone insufficient condition to the emergence of this agreement. American leadership will remain essential to its growth and evolution. The alignment of our regional partners and allies in both economic and security domains will ensure that the agreement endures. It will also incentivize others to join us in pooling critical capacities to advance and defend mutual interests. This transformation serves to constrain Iran – the threat from which has been recognized as causal – even as it constrains the malign influence and predatory practices of China and Russia. They will continue to manufacture and exploit fissures among the US and its regional partners if we fail to exploit the favorable shift in the region's security and economic architecture. On the other hand, appropriate support will allow the Abraham Accords to advance and secure America's interests with the use of significantly fewer resources and with more capable partners integrated as never before.

Establishing a regional security architecture, and normalizing relations between Israel and its neighbors, were intended to advance together – but by necessity took parallel paths.
It is instructive to recall that the foundation for both was established in May 2017 during President Donald Trump's visit to Riyadh and Jerusalem. This highlighting of the threat posed by Iran took more concrete form following a series of US-Israel strategic discussions in Jerusalem in November 2017, which were codified at the White House the following month. Initial conversations were between the United States and members of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) in addition to Egypt and Jordan, and were based on political, security, economic, and energy cooperation to separately establish the Middle East Strategic Alliance (MESA). While these early engagements were disrupted by the Gulf rift between Qatar and the Quartet (Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, and Egypt) they continued to provide a regional venue for security and economic cooperation.

By President Trump's May 8, 2018 announcement of the US withdrawal from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) and re-imposition of sanctions on Iran, discussions regarding the normalization of relations between Israel and its neighbors had begun to take form. Dialogue advanced following Secretary of State Mike Pompeo's "Ministerial to Promote a Future of Peace and Security in the Middle East" in Warsaw in February 2019. This made clear the consensus among the regions' leaders that the threats to their stability required unprecedented cooperation. Unfortunately, discussions on establishing MESA were dealt a blow in April 2019 when Egypt announced it was withdrawing its participation, being unsure of benefits beyond the existing bilateral relationship. The situation was further complicated by Saudi Arabia's desire to exclude economic cooperation from its foundational "pillars," a decision that divided U.S interagency consensus and that delayed the reaching of an agreement formalizing the alliance. Nonetheless, discussions continued, first in September during another Ministerial on the sidelines of the U.N. General Assembly in New York, and in November 2019 in a working group that included representation from the GCC.

In May and June of 2019, a series of high-level discussions convened by officials from the White House, the National Security Council (NSC), and the State Department followed in Washington, Israel, and the UAE. (These events included the first such trilateral meetings.) By December 2019 the conversations had grown to encompass national security challenges and the prospects for normalization of diplomatic relations. On January 28, 2020 the President unveiled his Middle East Peace plan, attended notably by ambassadors from the UAE, Bahrain, and Oman. The debate over MESA persisted but in February finally resulted in consensus among interagency principals; this just as the Coronavirus pandemic began to constrain international travel, making further progress difficult. This was especially problematic because normalization and regional security efforts were intended to advance together and ultimately reach a single goal, which would advance America's interests with additional capable partners integrated at an unprecedented level.

At its inception, the August 13, 2020 diplomatic normalization between Israel and the UAE ushered in an unprecedented transformation in the Middle East based on the pursuit of common interests and unimpeded by past disagreements. It expanded rapidly as Bahrain joined the signing ceremony on September 15th, followed by Sudan's agreement on October 23rd to normalize relations with Israel, and Morocco's agreeing on December 10th to restore diplomatic relations with Israel. This made something clear that had rarely been admitted in public, that these nations' interests are not only shared but also inextricably interconnected. Certainly the threat from violent extremism and Iran animated the members, but so too did the promise of cooperation and recovery from the pandemic's impact on their economies. Prior to the Accords, the Middle East had the lowest rate of intra-regional trade in the world, with just five percent of exports from Middle Eastern and North African countries with their regional neighbors. In the wake of the agreement the three countries established the Abraham Fund, expected to provide $3 billion to promote
regional economic cooperation. Mutual trade between Israel and the Emirates alone is expected to grow to $4 billion and add over 15,000 jobs this year. Since the agreement was signed, UAE-Israel imports have already reached over $88 million, with exports at $165 million and transit trade at nearly $27 million.

Those first steps taken in 2017 have led to historic agreements that have transformed the region. Further steps can be taken to capitalize on this success and achieve the long-envisioned potential:

- **Establish Trust:** An essential component of the agreement, trust among members begins with cooperation on security threats that preoccupy the region’s leaders. In addition to restating joint commitments to counter violent extremism, we should ensure close collaboration to address the regional threat from Iran and its surrogates. This can include the expansion of leverage over Ansarullah in Yemen to encourage negotiations, and to discourage their attacks on civilian targets which threaten the US, partners and interests; this while preserving the distribution of required humanitarian assistance. The State Department can rapidly affirm the interagency review which concluded in the approval of arms sales (along with corresponding controls and negotiated assurances) to the UAE and Saudi Arabia. These sales provide the tools required to combat shared threats, and in the face of objections we must recognize that Russia and China would be happy to make these sales as well, but without restrictions.

- **Expand scale:** Discussions should be advanced incrementally, commensurate with the constraints unique to each member. This can include the commencement of international flights, the opening of commercial offices, and the launch of bilateral discussions on economic issues. This can build on preliminary conversations already underway with Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Oman, Mauritania, Indonesia, Chad, Niger, and others. It can also include establishing formal representation in the GCC as a multilateral forum, distributing the burden and avoiding obstacles presented in bilateral venues. The steps taken by Egypt in 1979 and Jordan in 1994 warrant the inclusion of those countries as well. This should be accompanied by a corresponding review of our security cooperation with both, to ensure we remain their preferred partner.

- **Expand scope:** We intentionally pursued economic, cultural, and social issues in our preliminary steps as the basis to expand and build. It is time to pursue additional security cooperation and integration to address regional threats that include Iran, violent extremism, as well as Chinese and Russian malign influence. Warranting further consideration in this context is the foundational work to establish a regional security architecture to share the burdens and make effective use of the region’s capabilities as part of MESA. This would increase interoperability, expand compliance with international law through integration of forces and the principles to which they adhere, and reduce the commitment of US resources. Perhaps most importantly, it would serve to constrain and reverse the concerted efforts of China and Russia to expand their influence over a region where nations may become their clients for strategic weapon sales and form relationships that undermine our interests. It is also vital to recognize that the Middle East will remain of strategic priority for both Russian and China, with the latter’s interest especially focused on both energy and securing a valuable trade route to European markets.

- **Institutionalize:** Establishing a secretariat among the Accords’ members, including Egypt and Jordan, would serve to accelerate developments and provide an essential forum to expand membership. Conducting bilateral discussions can be complicated but is often pursued more effectively within a multilateral forum. The US can consider
appointing a Special Presidential Envoy to elevate the profile of such discussions and to signal their importance to existing and future members. This mechanism should continue to align strategic investments tools such as the Overseas Development Finance Corporation (DFC) and Export-Import Bank (EXIM), which both played critical roles in securing and implementing the Accords.

Without US leadership the historic agreements would not have been concluded; absent sustained investment they will fail to achieve their potential. Such a setback would constrain the region’s economic recovery from the pandemic, undermine productive negotiation with Iran, erode support for counterterrorism cooperation, open a door to malign influence by Russia and China, compromise regional stability, discourage essential cooperation, and provide an opportunity for a resurgence of ISIS and al Qa’ida.

But if we seize the opportunity that this historic agreement offers, the inverse holds. We could build upon it to enhance regional stability, security, and trade. We could also seize the opportunity for a US-led regional security architecture built to safeguard an economic foundation that can endure, while reducing our costs and constraining our adversaries.

The Abraham Accords constitute the beginning of a transformation within the region, but they must not be considered the culmination of the opportunity. These new relationships require American leadership to ensure growth and evolution. Succinctly, the alignment of our regional partners and allies in both economic and security domains constrains Iran. Just as important, this alignment limits the malign influence of China and Russia, nations that oppose us, that refuse to recognize Israel’s Qualitative Military Edge (QME), and that will continue to manufacture and exploit fissures among the US and its regional partners if we fail to exploit the historic shift in the region. Finally, the Accords bring to fruition a critical advancement of America’s interests, they do so by reducing the burden on our resources, and with the addition of capable partners who are now integrated like never before.

Robert Greenway is an adjunct fellow at the Hudson Institute who served on the National Security Council from 2017 to 2021 culminating as Deputy Assistant to the President and Senior Director for Middle Eastern and North African Affairs where he was a principal architect of the Abraham Accords. The views expressed are his own.

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Robert Greenway is an adjunct fellow at Hudson Institute. He has more than 30 years’ experience in public service culminating as the senior US government official responsible for developing, coordinating and implementing US government policy for all of the Middle East and North Africa on the National Security Council. While Deputy Assistant to the President and Senior Director of the National Security Council’s Middle Eastern and North African Affairs Directorate he planned and executed the United States’ most significant economic sanctions since the Cold War as part of a broader Iran strategy and was the principal architect of the Abraham Accords.

Before being assigned to the NSC he served at the Defense Intelligence Agency as a Senior Intelligence Officer in US Central Command. While assigned to USCENTCOM he deployed twice to Afghanistan as the Senior Intelligence Analyst for the Commander, Special Operations Joint Task Force from 2013-2014, and as Senior Intelligence Advisor for the Commander International Security Assistance Forces in 2011.

Mr. Greenway retired from active duty prior to joining the DIA having commanded Special Forces units at every level from Team through Battalion. In October 2001 he deployed in support of Operation Relentless Pursuit and Enduring Freedom I while assigned to a Special Mission Unit immediately following the attacks of September 11. He deployed again in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom 5th Special Forces Group (Airborne) in 2003 and 2004 where his duties included establishing the Iraqi Counterterrorism Force. Mr. Greenway was selected by the Deputy Secretary of Defense to report on the status of the Iraqi Insurgency before serving as a Counterterrorism Policy Advisor to the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations and Low Intensity Conflict. Mr. Greenway has an MA with Honors from Webster University and a BA from the Virginia Military Institute.

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