

*Has the United States advanced a promising platform for peace in the Middle East with its support for the so-called Abraham Accords which initially normalized relations between Israel and its former adversaries Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates? What are the sources driving normalization and are they likely influence other states to favor the full recognition of Israel? Alongside peace, the spread of democracy has often been an important American goal in the region. But recent surveys demonstrate that the authoritarian models of China and Russia are increasingly more attractive in the Middle East because of the failures of regional democratic movements. How can the United States counteract this trend?*

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## **The Future of U.S. Involvement in the Middle East**

Professor Ruth Beitler

In 2011, then Secretary of State Hillary Clinton wrote a piece in *Foreign Policy* outlining the rationale for pivoting to the Asia-Pacific, as the US withdrew from both Iraq and Afghanistan. She argued that “one of the most important tasks of American statecraft over the next decade will therefore be to lock in a substantially increased investment — diplomatic, economic, strategic, and otherwise — in the Asia-Pacific region.”<sup>1</sup> The United States’ “rebalance of interests”<sup>2</sup> from the Middle East to the Pacific region stemmed, in part, from shifting priorities in the international arena due to China’s bolstered economic clout and increasingly hardline position on issues in the South China Sea.<sup>3</sup> Despite this declaration, events in the Middle East from 2010 to the present, including the emergence of the Islamic State, civil wars in Libya, Syria and Yemen, Iran’s growing regional power and exacerbation of Sunni-Shia tensions, has kept the US engaged in the region.

President Biden reinvigorated the prioritization of US economic, diplomatic, and military assets in the Asia-Pacific region, prompting Middle Eastern allies’ concern about American commitment to their interests. Yet as veteran Middle East diplomat Dennis Ross asserts, after the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, “the Middle East has been elevated in the White House’s new geopolitical strategy for upholding the rules-based international system.”<sup>4</sup> Part of President Biden’s strategy in the Middle East, which continues the prior administration’s approach, is bolstering a system of burden-sharing to allow the US a reduced presence in the region. In 2019, the Trump administration’s Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo, delivered a speech in Cairo in which he emphasized the strategy of burden-sharing by arguing that the US would need to do more with less.<sup>5</sup>

### **Burden Sharing, Iran, and the Abraham Accords**

The signing of the Abraham Accords was one such manifestation of creating regional alliances to allow the US to do “more with less.” The normalization of ties between Israel and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Bahrain in September 2020, known as the Abraham Accords, and the subsequent agreements with Morocco and Sudan, was the culmination of years of “openly” clandestine relations between several Arab countries and Israel following the signing

of the Oslo accords in 1993. In the 1993 accords, Israel and the Palestinian Liberation Organization recognized each other's right to exist and began negotiations for a final status agreement with regards to Palestinian autonomy, which was supposed to be enacted by 1998. Although some progress was made with the creation of the Palestinian Authority and the Israeli withdrawal from the Gaza Strip, subsequent actions taken by both sides spelled the demise of the peace process.

While Egypt and Jordan had already signed peace treaties with Israel, in 1979 and 1994 respectively, "Oslo began to change the context for the Sunni Arab states. If the PLO, the embodiment of the Palestinian national movement, could deal with Israel, it became more acceptable for them to do so as well."<sup>6</sup> The signing of the Oslo Accords led Qatar and Oman to open trade offices with Israel in their capitals, followed by Israeli officials visiting Bahrain, Oman and Qatar.<sup>7</sup> And, when Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin was assassinated in 1995 by a Jewish extremist protesting peace with the Palestinians, Arab Gulf leaders without formal peace treaties with Israel openly attended his funeral.<sup>8</sup>

The public and explicit manifestation of changing Israeli-Arab relations was prodded by specific geopolitical shifts interrelated with US policy in the region. From the theoretical perspective of realism, where state security and power are key elements in foreign policy decisions, the 2003 removal of Saddam Hussein in Iraq eliminated a balancer for Iran. As such, Shia Iran was empowered in the region and perceived as a threatening revisionist power to many of the Sunni majority Arab states, as manifested in its support of various Shia groups throughout the region. This power shift, together with the 2015 signing of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), known as the Iran Nuclear Deal, led some countries to maintain that Iran was being empowered rather than curtailed.<sup>9</sup> The Nuclear Deal between Iran and the five permanent members of the United Nations plus Germany, limited Iran's nuclear program in return for sanctions relief.

Many of the Arab Gulf States and Israel opposed the nuclear deal, arguing that it did not solve the issue of Iranian sponsorship of terror groups, its ability to retain and grow its ballistic missile arsenal or eliminate its nuclear program completely. Due to these reasons, in 2018, the Trump administration pulled out of the JCPOA.<sup>10</sup> The Biden administration is working to revive and revise the Iranian Nuclear Deal, although the negotiations are at an impasse. The negotiations deteriorated further after the death of an Iranian Kurdish woman in September 2022 after she was arrested by Iran's morality police for allegedly not wearing the hijab correctly. This event set off a wave of protests leading to increased repression by the Iranian authorities.<sup>11</sup> Ned Price, the US Department of State spokesperson, said on October 12, 2022 that the US was currently focusing on the protests rather than on the nuclear deal."<sup>12</sup>

Consequently, aligning interests in reaction to the deal propelled Israel and Gulf states into an even closer relationship. Arab Gulf states also recognize the salience of economic power and a need to diversify their economy away from reliance on fossil fuels. Collaboration with Israel on areas of technology, communication, water desalinization, advanced agriculture, and tourism can strengthen these countries.<sup>13</sup> In 2020, Israel and the UAE had 180 million dollars in

bilateral trade, but by 2021 bilateral trade in diamonds, tourism, service sector and industrial goods was over one billion dollars. Parties to the Accords are continuing to expand their economic ties.<sup>14</sup>

A second explanation for the normalization of ties between Israel and the Arab countries stems from a slow-growing cultural change among some Arab states. In the early years of Israel's existence, Arab states competed to defend the shared cause of liberating Palestine and a taboo developed against negotiating with Israel. This norm was most evident in the adoption of the three "no's" in the 1967 Arab League Summit in Khartoum, rejecting peace, negotiations or recognition of Israel. However, the taboo of negotiating with Israel has diminished significantly over time beginning with Egyptian President Anwar Sadat's historic visit to Jerusalem in 1977, culminating in the recent Abraham Accords, and reflected also by the changing tone and rhetoric regarding Israel and Jews in the region.<sup>15</sup>

An additional, transactional catalyst also provided support for the signing of the accords. The US applied external pressure in the form of inducements to bring the parties together. For example, the Trump Administration promised to sell the UAE F-35's. The sale was delayed when the Biden administration took office in 2021 and eventually cancelled by the UAE, which protested US constraints to protect American technology from the Chinese.<sup>16</sup> Yet the prospect of future arms sales likely served as an incentive to regional actors. Also, Sudan was removed from the US list of state sponsors of terrorism, a decision which removed sanctions on that country.<sup>17</sup> Despite these immediate motivations to normalize relations with Israel, the accords might not have emerged without both geostrategic and cultural transformations occurring in the region.

### **The Abraham Accords and Israeli-Palestinian Peace**

For some scholars, although the Abraham Accords represent a change in regional relations, they do not necessarily reflect a move towards Israeli and Palestinian peace. As Patrick Kingley writes in the *New York Times*, "It has become increasingly clear that shared fears of a nuclear Iran — as well as shared concerns about the perceived retreat of the United States from the region, and the opportunities afforded by greater economic ties between Israel and the Arab world — now seem to be a greater priority for several Arab governments than an immediate resolution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict."<sup>18</sup>

Since Israel's creation in 1948, Arab states rejected the existence of Israel but eventually shifted to proposing diplomatic initiatives leveraging land for peace, along with the creation of a Palestinian state, as the price of normalizing relations with Israel.<sup>19</sup> The Abraham Accords changed this equation with Arab states airing publicly their frustration with Palestinians and their leadership's inability to solve the conflict.<sup>20</sup> Palestinians have called the Accords "disgraceful," asserting that states which normalized ties have betrayed them.<sup>21</sup> However, some regional actors contend that the Abraham Accords can "kickstart" the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, with Arab states serving as a bridge in this endeavor. These states could also leverage their relations with Israel to gain concessions for the Palestinians.<sup>22</sup>

**China and Russia's Middle East Influence<sup>23</sup>**

The impact of the Accords as a manifestation of the continued priority of burden-sharing was clear when President Biden visited Israel and Saudi Arabia in July 2022. Although President Biden had initially snubbed Saudi Prince Muhammed Bin Salman due to the brutal murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi, calling the state “a pariah,”<sup>24</sup> the Russian invasion of Ukraine prompted the US to strengthen regional alliances, early warning systems and air/missile defense.<sup>25</sup> Despite augmenting regional alliances, the reduction of US presence in the region has left inroads to the increased influence of China and Russia as well as that of a potentially nuclear armed Iran.

Russia's geostrategic interests in the Middle East stem from a perception that expanding their regional influence supports efforts to recover their former status as a global superpower. Russia has partnered with Shia factions in Iran, Iraq, and Syria. This strategy ingratiates Russia with a bloc that is generally unfriendly to US interests. At the same time, Russia maintains close relations with Turkey, Saudi Arabia, UAE, and Egypt. By doing so, it affects these countries' relations with the US. For example, Russia sold an S-400 anti-aircraft system to Turkey, a move which jeopardizes Turkey's status as a NATO ally.<sup>26</sup> And if Moscow can secure airbase or port rights in Egypt, Libya, or Lebanon, it can further expand its influence into the Mediterranean and deflect NATO's anti-Russia efforts further away from its borders.<sup>27</sup> Additionally, deepening ties between Russia and Iran were evident with Russian President Vladimir Putin's July 19, 2022 visit to Teheran, where he met with Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi and the Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei.<sup>28</sup> The increasing bonds reflect the confluence of Russian and Iranian interests to diminish US power in the region.

China's geostrategic interests are more economic in nature, specifically on ensuring its energy security through hydrocarbon investment. In March 2021, China signed an oil deal with Iran, pledging to invest \$400 billion dollars over 25 years across multiple sectors of Iran's economy in exchange for discounted Iranian oil. The deal undercuts the US objective of isolating Iran to force that country to curb or eliminate its nuclear program.<sup>29</sup> In its 2016 Arab Policy Paper, Beijing listed “infrastructure construction, trade and investment facilitation, nuclear power, space, new energy, agriculture, and finance as key areas of focus for Beijing in the region.”<sup>30</sup> It considers the Middle East a centerpiece of its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), designed to “create a logistical and financial trading network stretching from China across to Western Europe that will open up and link foreign markets to excess Chinese capital and capacity across a range of industries.”<sup>31</sup> The BRI means that China is expanding its influence beyond just Saudi Arabia and UAE (its two largest Middle East trade partners). It wants to influence Egypt, which controls the vital Suez Canal through which flows sixty percent of China's European exports, and Jordan and Israel, which provide key land access to the Mediterranean. For the last two decades, China has been working to balance its relationship with Iran and the Arab Gulf states to meet its economic interests, while avoiding regional conflicts.<sup>32</sup>

With China and Russia increasing both physical and economic presence in the region as the US has diminished its own, US regional allies' perception of threats have increased, pushing them to take more responsibility for securing their interests as confidence in the US as a reliable partner has weakened. Although tensions between Saudi Arabia and Iran are manifest in the

Yemeni conflict, along with other events, in April 2022, the Saudis and Houthis, the rebels backed by Iran, signed a cease-fire agreement, which was extended in August 2022. The ceasefire has decreased civilian casualties by sixty percent and stemmed population displacement by fifty percent.<sup>33</sup> The civil war in Yemen between Houthi rebels and Saudi Arabia began in 2015 and indicate, in part, the Sunni-Shia divide in the region.<sup>34</sup> The ceasefires reflect a perception by Saudi Arabia that the US commitment to its Middle East allies has declined and regional powers must attend to their own security requirements.

### Countering the Authoritarian Moment

The transition of authoritarian regimes to democratic ones has been a stated goal of US policy. When the Arab Spring erupted in Tunisia at the end of 2011, the US and regional protesters hoped for both political and material advantages to emerge from the excitement and success of revolution. Despite the initial promising nature of the protests with the fall of long-ruling authoritarian leaders, democratization progressed only in Tunisia, which after a decade is experiencing democratic backsliding. This failure of democracy to improve the civic and material well-being of the populations of the region has led to disillusionment with the benefits of democratization. Arab Barometer surveyed citizens in the Middle East in 2010-2011 and found that in eight of ten countries, over 70 percent believed that democracy was the best political system. At the same time, surveys in Egypt and Tunisia in 2011 identified economic considerations as protesters' priority.<sup>35</sup> Perhaps not surprisingly, surveys conducted in 2018-19 reflected a decline in support for democracy as economic conditions stagnated or worsened.

Continued high unemployment among youth, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and the inability of democracy to meet economic and political expectations has opened the door to influence from other regimes. "As U.S. influence has waned and regional economies stagnated, the Chinese economic and development model and, to a lesser extent, the Russian one, have become more attractive to many Arabs, particularly in contrast to the perceived limitations of Western neoliberalism."<sup>36</sup> Grasping that many Middle East citizens prioritize ameliorated economic conditions could inform US policies in the region going forward. As Amaney Jamal and Michael Robbins argue in *Foreign Affairs*: "Any effort to promote democracy must take into account citizens' aspirations for economic dignity. Appeals to abstract notions alone will not be persuasive. Arabs crave freedom and justice--but if democracy does not also deliver bread, Arabs will back political systems that do."<sup>37</sup>

### Conclusion and Key Questions

Critical questions arise from the above discussion about future US policy in the Middle East. Whether the Abraham Accords can provide a path towards a more peaceful relationship between Israel and the Arab world and lead to progress between the Israelis and the Palestinians is debated. Furthermore, given Chinese and Russian inroads into the region and China, and continued US and Iranian hostility, what should US policy be going forward?

For your roundtable discussions, please consider the following questions: Has the United States advanced a promising platform for peace in the Middle East with its support for the

Abraham Accords which initially normalized relations between Israel and its former adversaries Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates? What are the sources driving normalization and are they likely influence other states to favor the full recognition of Israel? Can they help push for a resolution to the Palestinian issue? Can the US encourage other alliances and institutions that further US foreign policy objectives such as curbing Iranian influence? What role can the Abraham accords have in furthering US foreign policy which includes maintaining a reduced American presence in the region and countering revisionist power inroads into the Middle East? Alongside peace, the spread of democracy has often been an important American goal in the region. But [recent surveys](#) demonstrate that the authoritarian models of China and Russia are increasingly more attractive in the Middle East because of the failures of regional democratic movements. How can the United States counteract this trend? How might an expanded and revived NATO, coupled with the renewal of strong connections between the US and Europe following the Russian invasion of Ukraine, lead to positive outcomes in the Middle East?

### Suggested Readings

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## Endnotes

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- <sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.
- <sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.
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- <sup>13</sup> Shmuel Evan, Tomer Fadlon and Yoel Guzansky, [“The Economic-Strategic Dimension of the Abraham Accords,”](#) *INSS Insight* No. 1388, October 12, 2020.
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<sup>36</sup>Jamal and Robbins, “Why Democracy Stalled.”

<sup>37</sup>Jamal and Robbins, “Why Democracy Stalled.”