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The Regional Impact of the Abraham Accords

Amr Yossef

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About the Author: Amr Yossef is a fellow at the Modern War Institute who researches Middle East politics and security, with a particular focus on conflict, war, the military, and foreign policy decision making. He is the author of the book *The Arab Spring and the Geopolitics of the Middle East* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2015, with Joseph Cerami) and his articles have appeared in the *Journal of Strategic Studies*, *Res Militaris*, *Digest of Middle East Studies*, and other outlets. He has also contributed chapters to three edited volumes: *Egypt's Tahrir Revolution* (Lynne Rienner, 2013), *Military Exercises: Political Messaging and Strategic Impact* (NATO Defense College, 2018), and *The Regional Order in the Gulf Region and the Middle East* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2020). Previously, Yossef has been a visiting scholar at Columbia University's Saltzman Institute of War and Peace Studies, an adjunct professor of political science at the American University in Cairo (AUC), and a postdoctoral fellow at New York University's Taub Center for Israel Studies. He has taught courses in international relations, Middle East politics, and Arab-Israeli wars. He holds a bachelor's degree in oriental languages and literature from Cairo University, master of arts in political science from AUC, and PhD in international studies from the University of Trento.

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Introduction

The end of 2020 saw a number of important developments in the long-lasting Arab-Israeli conflict. These began in September 2020, with the signing in the White House of the Abraham Accords—formally the Treaty of Peace, Diplomatic Relations and Full Normalization between the United Arab Emirates and the state of Israel (UAE)—which explicitly aimed to foster development and prosperity through cooperation in various civilian fields: health, agriculture, tourism, energy, environment, and innovation. Bahrain would join the Abraham Accords soon after, announcing it as the Declaration of Peace, Cooperation, and Constructive Diplomatic and Friendly Relations. They were followed by announcements in October and December 2020 of similar normalization agreements with Sudan and Morocco, respectively. There are reports in the media that other Arab states, including Saudi Arabia, may follow suit.[1]

None of the Arab states joining the accords (both current and prospective) share a border with Israel, nor has any participated in combat against it in any of the seven Arab-Israeli wars between 1948 and 2006 (except for Morocco, briefly, during the October 1973 war). Also, Israel's political relations with these countries prior to the accords were not the same across the board. Relations ranged from overt hostility (e.g., Sudan) to no relations (e.g., the UAE and Bahrain) to short-term diplomatic relations at the level of liaison offices (e.g., Morocco, 1995–2000). Nevertheless, this series of agreements is historic, as it is only the third instance of normalization between Israel and its Arab neighbors (following Egypt, in 1979 and Jordan in 1994) and embodies a rare renunciation of hostility in the conflict-torn Middle East.

Besides advancing bilateral economic and technological cooperation among the parties, the Abraham Accords have several implications for US security in the Middle East, including US arms sales and Iran's hegemonic ambitions in the region, as well as implications for the nearly century-long Palestinian-Israeli conflict. The implications of the accords for US security in the Middle East, as well as for the Palestinian-Israeli conflict,

[1] Joseph Hincks, "Will Saudi Arabia Be Next to Normalize Relations with Israel? Don't Hold Your Breath, Experts Say," *Time*, September 18, 2020, https://time.com/5890151/saudi-arabia-israel-abraham-accords/

should be seen through the lens of how it reshapes and solidifies the alignment system governing the region, knowing that the accords themselves are the latest in a series of developments in this alignment system that started in the mid-1990s.

This report provides a more coherent account of the accords, with a focus on the regional impact—that is, on the alignments and alliances in the Middle East—and its implications for US policy in the region. The report is therefore divided into three sections. Following this introduction, the first section is a background on the rival alignments in the Middle East, with an emphasis on the developments following the 2011 Arab Spring uprisings. The second section proceeds to explain the regional impact of the accords on these alignments, particularly the way the accords consolidate the status quo alignment vis-à-vis the revisionist. The third section concludes with implications and policy recommendations.

Background on the Middle East Alignments[2]

The Arab Spring has sharpened, though not created, the current division of the Middle East into status quo and revisionist alignments. This in turn has paved the way for the Gulf States to become not merely players but the *leading* force for geopolitics in the region, setting the stage for the Abraham Accords.

The status quo alignment evolved in the mid-1950s as a group of Middle Eastern states that typically have a close relationship or an alliance with the United States. Members of the status quo alignment generally gravitate toward accommodation with the West as the guarantor of the region's security, peaceful settlement of the Arab-Israeli conflict and coexistence with Israel, and assertion of noninterference norms. The revisionist alignment, by contrast, advocates hostility toward the West, which they perceive as seeking to dominate the region. Falling under either Arab nationalism or Islamism, revisionists are also more tolerant of engaging in armed conflict to confront Israel and seek to export revolutionary policies to the status quo powers. Notably, the

[2] This section is based on Amr Yossef, "Gulfization of the Middle East: The Arab Spring's Systemic Shift," in *The Regional Order in the Gulf Region and the Middle East: Regional Rivalries and Security Alliances*, ed. Philipp O. Amour (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 61–94.

tendency to link status quo policy with defensiveness and a revisionist policy with aggressiveness is mistaken. Status quo powers can behave aggressively, and revisionist powers can ally with the existing "rules of the game."[3]

While the composition of each alignment has changed over time, the basic division has survived. For example, in the 1970s, Egypt, under President Anwar Sadat, shifted to the status quo alignment, whereas the Islamic Revolution against the Shah moved Iran the other way. More recently, Turkey has been becoming more revisionist under the leadership of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and the Justice and Development Party (AKP) in the 2000s. Qatar has also deviated from the status quo-aligned Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC)—incorporating the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA), the UAE, Kuwait, Oman, and Bahrain—to a more Islamist-oriented revisionist camp.[4] Prior to the Arab Spring, the alignments were defined primarily by the Arab-Israeli conflict. The status quo camp advocated peace with Israel as the most strategically wise option for the Arab states, while the revisionists opposed peace in favor of continuing armed conflict with what they consider to be an illegitimate state.

The Arab Spring uprisings have sharpened the regional division in two ways. As a revolutionary wave, it has empowered the revisionists (and weakened the status quo alignment). Iran and Turkey celebrated the Arab Spring as an Islamic awakening that would bring more Islamist-oriented governments.[5] Both countries have also sought to take advantage of the power vacuum created by the retreat of the United States from the region and the weakening of its Arab allies, by expanding their influence, directly or (mostly) by proxy in the conflicts in Syria, Iraq, Yemen, and Libya.[6]

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[3] Ka Po Ng, *Interpreting China's Military Power: Doctrine Makes Readiness* (Abingdon, UK: Taylor and Francis, 2005), 10–11.
[4] David B. Roberts, "Qatar and the UAE: Exploring Divergent Responses to the Arab Spring," *Middle East Journal* 71, no. 4 (2017): 560.
[5] Bulent Aras and Emirhan Yorulmazlar, "Turkey and Iran after the Arab Spring: Finding a Middle Ground," *Middle East Policy* 21, no. 4 (Winter 2014): 112–120.
[6] Shaharam Akbarzadeh, "Iran and the Gulf Cooperation Council Sheikhdoms," in *The Small Gulf States: Foreign and Security Policies before and after the Arab Spring*, ed. Jean-Marc Rickli and Khalid S. Almezaini (London: Routledge, 2017), 90–96; Birol Başkan, "Islamism and Turkey's Foreign Policy during the Arab Spring," *Turkish Studies* 19, no. 2 (2018): 264–88.

On the other hand, the Arab Spring also caused a drastic redistribution of power *within* the status quo alignment in favor of the Gulf States, contributing to the "Gulfization of the Middle East."[7] In the pre–Arab Spring struggle against the revisionists, the status quo–aligned Arab Gulf States could count on the support from regional allies (Iran in the 1960s and Egypt from the 1980s onward), but essentially they relied on the United States. Since the Arab Spring, support has not been sufficiently available from the US or traditional regional powers. Iran has turned, since 1979, into the main rival, while the revolution in Egypt itself caused a destabilization of the country, making it (and Jordan) more dependent on the Gulf States for economic aid. The Gulf States, by contrast, via abundant finance, media empires, and a central position in transnational networks, are well qualified to project power capabilities abroad.[8]

Most of the status quo–aligned Arab Gulf states felt threatened by the popular protests of the Arab Spring and the possibility that Iran could exploit unrest in their countries as it did in Bahrain. Combined with a perception of US reluctance to intervene on behalf of its allies, this pushed them (especially the KSA and the UAE) to engage in active political and military efforts against the revisionist parties in the conflicts in Syria, Libya, and Yemen. By contrast, Qatar decided to support the Islamists, partly to survive the regional turmoil, for fears of being too small against the sweeping effects of political Islam, and partly to exploit it, for hope of joining the eventual winners and magnifying its influence, and therefore decided to ally with Turkey.[9]

Unsurprisingly, the Arab Gulf States in both camps have turned, albeit quietly, into the leading interlocutors in the Arab-Israeli conflict, dealing with which has been traditionally the prerogative of states in the Levant. In an interview in April 2018, the Saudi

[7] Yossef, "Gulfization of the Middle East", 61.
[8] Marc Lynch, "The New Arab Order: Power and Violence in Today's Middle East," *Foreign Affairs*, September–October 2018.
[9]Marwa Maziad, "The Turkish Burden: The Cost of the Turkey-Qatar Alliance and Hard Power Projection into Qatar's Foreign Policy," in *The Arab Gulf States and the West: Perceptions and Realities—Opportunities and Perils*, ed. Dania Koleilat Khatib and Marwa Maziad (London: Routledge, 2019): 112–14.

crown prince voiced recognition of Israel's right to exist.[10] Former senior Saudi officials had earlier signaled establishing peace with Israel as a priority.[11] On the other side, Qatar, which turned into the main financial sponsor of Hamas and the host of its political leadership, assumed a key role in the cease-fire negotiations during the recent rounds of fighting between Hamas and Israel in the Gaza Strip.[12]

Against this background came the Abraham Accords, at a time when the Arab Spring posed challenges for Israel, but it has also offered opportunities. It has relegated the Israeli occupation to a second-tier issue, as regional actors are preoccupied with more urgent business either in their own countries or in their immediate neighborhood, and enabled Israel to improve ties with status quo Arab states, especially in the Gulf, with which it has shared the threat of the revisionist alignment.

Regional Impact: Consolidation of the Status Quo Alignment

Israel's relations with the Arab Gulf States have long been analyzed from the perspective of a tacit security regime based on shared political security and economic interests.[13] Further and deeper developments were also expected. For example, a recent futurist scenario that came out in June 2020 in the US Air Force *Global Futures Report* foresaw that the Arab Quartet of "Egypt, UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Bahrain are increasingly converging on shared interests with Israel."[14] The report predicted such a convergence as a product of the main "fault line" in the Middle East that pits the Turkey-Qatar alliance

[10] Jeffrey Goldberg, "Saudi Crown Prince: Iran's Supreme Leader 'Makes Hitler Look Good,'" *Atlantic*, April 2, 2018, https://www.theatlantic.com/international/ archive/2018/04/mohammed-bin-salman-iran-israel/557036/.
[11] Elie Podeh, "Saudi Arabia and Israel: From Secret to Public Engagement, 1948–2018," *Middle East Journal* 72, no. 4 (2018): 581–82.
[12] Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, *Qatar and the Arab Spring: Policy Drivers and Regional Implications* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2014), 23–24, https://carnegieendowment.org/files/qatar_arab_spring.pdf.
[13] Clive Jones and Yoel Guzansky, "Israel's Relations with the Gulf States: Toward the Emergence of a Tacit Security Regime?," *Contemporary Security Policy* 38, no. 3 (2017): 398–419.
[14] Marwa Maziad, "The Future of Geopolitical Competition in the Middle East," in *Global Futures Report: Alternative Futures of Geopolitical Competition in a Post-COVID-19 World*, ed. Jake Sotiriadis (Arlington, VA: Air Force Warfighting Integration Capability,2020), 32, https://www.afwic.af.mil/Portals/72/Documents/AFWIC%20Global%20Futures%20Report_FINAL.pdf?ver=2020-06-18-124149-070.

against the Arab Quartet plus Israel.[15] Yet at the regional level, the accords themselves made a significant impact manifested in the following three main ways.

First, by going public and enlarging and deepening cooperation, the Abraham Accords consolidate the status quo alignment in the Middle East against the revisionist alignment. The Arab Spring's impact of empowering the revisionist alignment, as noted earlier, persisted. Iran's commitment is central to the revisionist alignment both for its nuclear potential and its military presence, on its own or by proxy, in Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, and Yemen. But Iran is not alone.

The UAE ranks the threat of Turkey—especially its alliance with Qatar—as a higher priority than Iran in the immediate term.[16] The Turkish-Qatari alliance confronts the UAE forces and its partners and is believed to be the foremost external threat to the UAE.[17] Turkey has also recently grown as a challenge for Israel, as well, through its support of Israeli adversaries (i.e., the Muslim Brotherhood, including Hamas, and Iran) and its destabilization attempts of partners (mainly Egypt).[18] Despite their competition in Syria, Iran and Turkey both want a government in Damascus that remains outside the US sphere of influence and supports the conflict against Israel. They also both have a mutual pro-Qatar stance in the recent Arab Quartet–Qatar dispute and increasingly troubled relations with the United States.[19]

The accords signal the determination of its parties to face this challenge. The UAE and Bahrain broke the Arab taboo of normalizing relations with Israel, which likewise indicated a willingness to break its own taboo against defense commitments to other

[15]Maziad, "Future of Geopolitical Competition in the Middle East," 32.
[16]Marwa Maziad, "Turkish Burden," 111–19.
[17]Marwa Maziad and Jake Sotiriadis, "Turkey's Dangerous New Exports: Pan-Islamist, Neo-Ottoman Visions and Regional Instability," Middle East Institute, April 21, 2020, https://www.mei.edu/publications/turkeys-dangerous-new-exports-pan-islamist-neo-ottoman-visions-and-regional.
[18]Efraim Inbar, Eran Lerman, and Hay Eytan Cohen Yanarocak, "Turkey as a Major Challenge for Israel (and Its Neighbors) in the 21st Century," Jerusalem Institute for Strategy and Security, September 16, 2020, https://jiss.org.il/en/inbar-lerman-yanarocak-turkey-as-a-major-challenge-for-israel-and-its-neighbors/.
[19]Vahid Yücesoy, "The Recent Rapprochement between Iran and Turkey: Is It Durable or Is It a Relationship of Convenience?" *Turkish Studies* 21, no. 2 (2019): 274–96.

nations.[20] The accords formalize Israel's membership in the status quo alignment. Up to this point, Israel had been only a de facto member of the status quo alignment. Ever since the 1950s, in the so-called Periphery Doctrine, Israel extended ties to Kemalist Turkey and the Imperial State of Iran to weaken a potential Arab-nationalist alliance against it. As Iran and Turkey turned revisionist, in the late 1970s and 2000s, respectively, Israel's Arab status quo partners increased their cooperation with Israel, either openly following formal peace treaties (Egypt in 1979 and Jordan in 1994) or tacitly, as with the pre-1994 Jordan and the Gulf States since the 1990s. Nevertheless, this constitutes the first time that normalization of relations would reach that extensive level, since normalization with Egypt and Jordan remained limited nevertheless.

This explains the consistent point made by UAE experts analyzing the significance of the accords as "strengthening the axis of moderation" (comprising the Arab Quartet plus Jordan) vis-à-vis the "radical axis" (Iran and its proxies), based on shared security interests with Israel.[21] Bahrain's minister of interior has explicitly justified the accords for building a stronger alliance against Iran.[22] There is even an (overly) optimistic expectation that this strengthening might be a "game changer" in the sense of pushing Iran and Turkey to change or, at least, moderate their policies in the region.[23] These messages that the accords signaled were well received, as shown by reactions to the accords. Iran and Turkey have both vocally criticized the accords, accusing the UAE of making a huge mistake and of betraying Muslims and the Palestinian cause.[24] Officially, Qatar has refrained from

[20] Shmuel Sandler, *The Abraham Accords: The Strategic Aspect*, Perspectives Paper no. 1,841 (Ramat Gan, Israel: Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies, December 8, 2020), https://besacenter.org/perspectives-papers/Abraham-accords-strategic-aspect/.
[21] "The UAE-Israel peace treaty: Potential regional and strategic implications" [in Arabic], Emirates Policy Center, September 16, 2020, https://epc.ae/ar/topic/the-emirati-israeli-peace-treaty-potential-regional-and-strategic-implications.
[22] "Minister of interior: 'If Palestine is our Arab cause, then Bahrain is our existential cause'" [in Arabic], Alayam, September 14, 2020, https://www.alayam.com/online/local/871984/News.html.
[23] Ebtesam al-Ketbi, "The Emirati-Israeli peace agreement: Could it be a game changer?" Emirates Policy Center, September 24, 2020, https://epc.ae/brief/emirati-israeli-peace-agreement-could-it-be-a-game-changer.
[24] "Iran, Turkey slam UAE over agreement with Israel," Deutsche Welle, August 14, 2020, https://www.dw.com/en/israel-uae-relations/a-54564050.

referring to the accords, but the Doha-based Al Jazeera network has vilified them.[25] Therefore, it is not unlikely that the revisionists may respond by providing increasing support to Islamist factions throughout the region to thwart the emerging agenda.[26]

Second, the Abraham Accords bear an important symbolic weight—the revisionists are losing. The accords explicitly focus on development and prosperity through cooperation in various civilian fields: health, agriculture, tourism, energy, environment, and innovation. Cooperation in these fields would yield significant economic benefits for the parties.[27] But there is more.

This cooperation corresponds to the vital interests that concern the peoples of the region. Unlike in the past, when massive demonstrations would denounce peace or normalization deals with Israel—which has for decades constituted the Arabs' archenemy and therefore a convenient diversion for dissent against regimes—the accords received little popular criticism in the Arab world. This fact shows that in today's Middle East, the people no longer seek pan-Arab or pan-Islamic unity but the rule of law, better public services (e.g., social welfare, education, and health), and greater economic opportunity and innovation.[28] This, in turn, confirms a trend that has, with the violent turns of the Arab Spring uprisings, gone unnoticed—Israel's name was almost never heard in the domestic-focused Arab uprisings; rather, "the main motivation of the masses to join the intelligentsia, forming a critical mass to challenge the long-ruling regimes was to protest against the

[25] See, for example, Mohamed Jarabaa, "UAE-Bahrain-Israel normalization deal and its implications on the Palestinians" [in Arabic], Al Jazeera, September 20, 2020, https://studies.aljazeera.net/ar/article/4787.
[26]Yoel Guzansky and Ari Heistein, "The Benefits and Challenges of UAE-Israel Normalization," Middle East Institute, September 16, 2020, https://www.mei.edu/publications/benefits-and-challenges-uae-israel-normalization.
[27]Shmuel Even, Tomer Fadlon and Yoel Guzansky, "The Economic-Strategic Dimension of the Abraham Accords," Institute for National Security Studies, October 12, 2020, https://www.inss.org.il/publication/abraham-accords-economic-dimension/.
[28]Hillel Frisch, *The Israel-UAE Agreement's Greatest Achievement, Little Arab Protest*, Perspectives Paper no. 1,729 (Ramat Gan, Israel: Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies, September 3, 2020), https://besacenter.org/perspectives-papers/israel-uae-peace-protest/.

failure of the state to provide."[29] The implication, therefore, is that the revisionist rationale has been losing ground at the street level.

Third, the Abraham Accords demonstrate the Gulfization of the Middle East, in the sense of the leadership of Gulf parties and the priority of Gulf issues. The Gulf leadership of the status quo alignment is well noted in the reactions of the alignment's two other members from the Levant, which used to be the center of Arab politics. Egypt, which was the first Arab country to make peace with Israel in 1979, welcomed the accords as a "historic peace step … [that would] bring stability to the Middle East."[30] Jordan, which followed suit in 1994, welcomed the accords, too, though with some restraint in the official statements. This restraint is reported to be a result of being "pushed aside" as leading brokers between Israel and the Palestinians when the UAE and Bahrain received the credit for postponement of annexation by Israel of parts of the occupied Palestinian territories.[31]

Bahrain's minister of interior has made clear the current order of priorities: "If Palestine is our Arab cause, then Bahrain is our existential cause."[32] Other experts have similarly remarked, "The Gulf is an Arab cause, too,"[33] referring to the threat Iran presents to the Arab Gulf kingdoms. A result of Gulfization is the primacy of the Gulf issues (e.g., the KSA versus Iran, the Arab Quartet versus Qatar, the war in Yemen) over others in the Middle East (e.g., the Palestinian cause). The Arab-Israeli conflict (whose symbolic intensity used to tie together a wide geographical spread of Arab and Islamic states)[34] has been relegated to a second-tier issue.

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[29]Amr Yossef and Joseph Cerami, *The Arab Spring and the Geopolitics of the Middle East: Revolutionary Change and Emerging Threats* (London: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2015), 6.

[30] "President El-Sisi Telephones Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi," Arab Republic of Egypt Presidency, August 13, 2020, https://www.presidency.eg/en/قسم-الأخبار/أخبار-رئاسية/الرئيس-عبد-الفتاح-السيسي-يجري-اتصال-ا-هاتفي-ا-بولي-عهد-ابو-ظبي-1382020/.

[31]Udi Dekel and Noa Shusterman, "Behind the Scenes of the Abraham Accords: Insights from an INSS Cabinet," Institute for National Security Studies, September 24, 2020, https://www.inss.org.il/publication/abraham-accord-behind-the-scenes/.

[32]"Minister of Interior."

[33]Gamal Abu Alhasan, "And the Gulf is an Arab cause, too" [in Arabic], *Almasry Alyoum*, September 8, 2020, https://today.almasryalyoum.com/article2.aspx?ArticleID=650274&IssueID=6513.

[34]Barry Buzan and Ole Waever, *Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 192–93.

Implications and Policy Recommendations

One critique of the Abraham Accords points out that the accords "don't end a single conflict in the Middle East" and that normalization "without a peace agreement between Israel and the Palestinian Authority erodes further the prospect of a two-state solution."[35] Another warns against the potential of making the belligerence of Iran even worse by encouraging more aggressive policies by the UAE and Israel.[36] Reality, however, is more complex and discussion should be more comprehensive by focusing on the following three implications of the accords: the prospects for a US-proposed Middle East Strategic Alliance (MESA), a potential resolution for the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, and the resilience of the accords.

True, the accords do not end any conflict, and in fact, neither party to the accords has claimed otherwise. However, they do attempt to prevent an expansion of the many existing conflicts in the Middle East. By definition, status quo powers (in this case, Israel, the UAE, and Bahrain) aim at preserving the established order—"rules of the game" and distribution of goods—and stand to benefit from it.[37] Revisionist powers—which are dissatisfied, as they "value what they covet more than what they currently possess"[38]—seek to change the established order to improve their position within it or may even attempt to reorder it in their favor. An important incentive of the status quo parties to reach the accords has been to deter the revisionists (i.e., Iran, Turkey, and their proxies) from reshaping the region to their own order, especially given the perceived US retreat from the region.

Because the revisionists' order would necessarily be anti-Western, the accords serve a US strategic interest in that it affords "the U.S. a chance to deny access to Russia and China

[35]Ezzedine C. Fishere, "The UAE-Bahrain-Israel Accords Are a Big Step—In the Wrong Direction," *Washington Post*, September 21, 2020, https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2020/09/21/uae-bahrain-israel-accords-are-big-step-wrong-direction/.
[36] Kenneth M. Pollack, "It's Not a Peace Deal. It's a Powder Keg," *Foreign Policy*, August 21, 2020, https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/08/21/its-not-a-peace-deal-its-a-powder-keg/.
[37] Arnold Wolfers, "The Balance of Power in Theory and Practice," *Naval War College Review* 11, no. 5 (1959): 11–13.
[38] David Zionts, "Revisionism and Its Variants: Understanding State Reactions to Foreign Policy Failure," *Security Studies* 15, no. 4 (October 2006): 633.

in the region—all while maintaining a lighter American footstep there."[39] The United States has already proposed, in 2017, to establish MESA, which would include its Arab partners (i.e., GCC states plus Egypt and Jordan) as a collective security structure to achieve these very interests (i.e., "to target Iran and to reduce U.S. regional presence without allowing China or Russia to gain influence").[40] Even though the proposed MESA is far less than an "Arab NATO"—that is, it contains no Article 5 on mutual defense or a joint military command—several obstacles, primarily mistrust, lack of common threat assessment, and the 2017–2020 dispute between the Arab Quartet and Qatar, have prevented progress.[41] Precisely because these obstacles are likely to persist, the accords could serve either as the nucleus of a future MESA in the long term or, until then, as a credible alternative to such an alliance.

Note that the US historical experience in forming a Middle East collective security structure styled after NATO (i.e., a formal alliance targeting a global threat) is not promising. In the mid-1950s, pro-West countries in the region (Iran, Iraq, Pakistan, and Turkey), with the support of the United States, joined the United Kingdom in establishing the Middle East Treaty Organization (METO) in 1955. But METO proved to be one of the least successful alliances during the Cold War, and it was eventually dissolved in 1979. As a credible alternative to MESA, the accords, especially when they are now extended to Sudan and Morocco, with more potential candidates (perhaps Oman or Mauritania) being considered, could form a regional partnership whose less formal but more practical and flexible arrangement avoids the abovementioned complexities involved in establishing MESA. The Pentagon's decision in January 2021 to shift Israel from US European Command (EUCOM) to US Central Command (CENTCOM) may be a step in this direction, as it pointed

[39]Amin Tarzi, *The Strategic Benefits to the US and Israel of Offering F-35s to the UAE*," Perspectives Paper no. 1,753, September 18, 2020,
https://besacenter.org/perspectives-papers/f35-uae-benefits/.
[40]Yasmine Farouk, "The Middle East Strategic Alliance Has a Long Way to Go," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, February 8, 2019,
https://carnegieendowment.org/2019/02/08/middle-east-strategic-alliance-has-long-way-to-go-pub-78317.
[41]Luke Coffey and James Phillips, "The Middle East Strategic Alliance: An Uphill Struggle," Heritage Foundation, April 7, 2020,
https://www.heritage.org/middle-east/report/the-middle-east-strategic-alliance-uphill-struggle.

to the accords as "a strategic opportunity … to align key US partners against shared threats in the Middle East."[42]

With respect to the implications for the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the critics' view is that "a broad Arab recognition of Israel, and the prospect of cooperation and business partnerships, was one of the few remaining incentives for Israel to make territorial concessions to the weakened Palestinians."[43] Nevertheless, this view ignores two important facts. First, this incentive offer has been available at least for the last three decades, but it did not produce the expected result. Second, Israel has implicitly followed the "land for peace" formula when it accepted, in exchange for normalization with the UAE, an extended halt of Israel's plans to annex 30 percent of the occupied West Bank.[44] Furthermore, polls in Israel show that the accords have, for the first time in decades, reintroduced the terms "peace" and "normalization" as positive aspects in the Israeli public mindset.[45]

The criticism about the accords weakening the Palestinian diplomatic position is not without reason. However, in the final analysis, and regardless of how much Israel's position is strengthened vis-à-vis the Palestinian Authority, the problem will remain unsolved. The Palestinian people—millions living in the West Bank and Gaza with legitimate national aspirations—are Israel's main issue, and they are not going anywhere. For this reason, the Biden administration will have to deal with the unresolved Israeli-Palestinian conflict, particularly its core issues, unmentioned in the accords: the occupation of the West Bank, the settlements, the ongoing siege of Gaza, the refugee question, and the situation in East Jerusalem.[46] This is especially the case given the likelihood of the Palestinian Authority's

[42] US Department of Defense, "Department of Defense Statement on Unified Command Plan Change," Jan. 15, 2021, https://www.defense.gov/Newsroom/Releases/Release/Article/2473648/department-of-defense-statement-on-unified-command-plan-change/.
[43]Fishere, "UAE-Bahrain-Israel Accords Are a Big Step."
[44]Guzansky and Heistein, "Benefits and Challenges of UAE-Israel Normalization."
[45] Gil Murciano, "The Abraham Accords: An invitation to rethink the Arab-Israeli conflict," Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politick, *Point of View*, Oct. 8, 2020, https://www.swp-berlin.org/en/publication/the-abraham-accords-an-invitation-to-rethink-the-arab-israeli-conflict/.
[46] Yonatan Mendel, "Tatbi or not tatbi?", *London Review of Books*, Jan. 19, 2021,

denunciation of the accords. Its rejection of the "deal of the century"[47] may play into the hands of the revisionist alignment to legitimize its anti-West, ant-Israel public campaign. It is not a coincidence that the rival Palestinian factions, Fatah and Hamas, meeting for the first time in years, chose the location of Istanbul, Turkey, to discuss forming a united Palestinian front against the normalization deals.[48]

Finally, the future stability of the accords should not be taken for granted. The Abraham Accords, despite the benefits they bring to the parties and to the United States, have their own challenges, just as the successful Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty has had. The bilateral peace made in 1979 remains stable to this day after four decades—in fact, Egypt and Israel have now lived in peace longer than they lived in war—and is founded on strong security cooperation. Nevertheless, it is easy to forget that the Egyptian-Israeli peace faced serious challenges, especially deterioration of relations against the background of the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982, the First Palestinian Intifada in 1987, the Second Intifada in 2000, the Gaza war in 2012, several lethal incidents on the border, and of course, the attempted attack on the Israeli Embassy in Cairo during the Egyptian revolution in 2011. It has not always looked so stable.

The Egyptian-Israeli peace survived these challenges not only because of peace dividends. Of course, Egypt restored Sinai to its sovereignty, and Israel received an efficient security mechanism. But cooperation in economic and other civilian fields has never been critical until recently with the bilateral cooperation in the natural gas industry, which extended to multilateral cooperation involving other countries in the eastern Mediterranean.[49] Rather, the treaty has withstood primarily because it saves both countries the costs of war, because their two defense establishments both have a strong

https://www.lrb.co.uk/blog/2021/january/tatbi-or-not-tatbi.

[47] BBC, "Netanyahu: Trump Middle East peace plan 'deal of the century'," Jan. 28, 2020, https://www.bbc.com/news/av/world-middle-east-51289277.

[48] Jack Khoury, "In Subtle Message to Egypt, Palestinian Factions Hold Reconciliation Talks in Turkey," *Haaretz*, September 22, 2020, https://www.haaretz.com/middle-east-news/palestinians/.premium-in-subtle-message-to-egypt-palestinians-head-to-turkey-for-reconciliation-talks-1.9176952.

[49] "East Mediterranean States Formally Establish Egypt-Based Gas Forum," Reuters, September 22, 2020, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-energy-idUSKCN26D14D.

commitment to peace,[50] and because the United States has committed to extending substantial military and economic aid to the two countries for decades.

On the one hand, it is still premature to declare the extent to which Israel, the UAE, and Bahrain will cooperate based on normalizations of the Abraham Accords, as well as on their normalizations with Sudan and Morocco. Regardless, this cooperation alone would not determine peace or war. Since such *vital* interests are absent from the Abraham Accords, the costs of disregarding the agreement are not as great as in the case of the Egyptian-Israeli treaty. On the other hand, the accords have been made possible due in large part to the homogenous views of the political leadership in the United States and Israel in 2020. Notably, each peace deal has essentially included a specific US compromise that would not have probably been made otherwise: for the UAE, the United States approved extensive arms sales; Sudan was removed it from the US list of state sponsors of terrorism; and for Morocco, the United States recognized its sovereignty over the western Sahara. The UAE was reportedly concerned that a Democratic administration in the White House might adopt a rapprochement with Iran, which led the UAE to deliberately accelerate the process of reaching the accords before the US presidential elections in November 2020.[51] Notwithstanding the veracity of these reports, there is a risk that the new Biden administration might not continue the same approach, even if reversing the US commitment to the accords themselves can safely be ruled out.

Recommendations for US policy are twofold. First, America's overall strategic awareness of developments and trend lines in the region should be enhanced. Even before the 2011 Arab uprisings, Iran and other revisionist Islamist forces, including Turkey, have been on the offensive, taking advantage of the United States' disengagement from the region. The United States should recognize who is who in the Middle East and act accordingly. Further defense cooperation—including the potential sale of advanced US weapon and intelligence systems, such as the fifth-generation F-35 Joint Strike Fighter (JSF), to the UAE—would provide both parties much "greater defensive depth" vis-à-vis

[50]Amr Yossef, "Israel and the Tahrir Revolution," in *Egypt's Tahrir Revolution*, ed. Dan Tschirgi, Walid Kazziha, and Sean F. McMahon (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2013), 214–20.
[51]"UAE-Israel peace treaty: Potential regional and strategic implications."

Iran and empower the status quo–aligned states.[52] By contrast, the United States should also counter revisionist states in the region. The Biden administration should encourage Turkey (a NATO member), to align its regional policies with those of other US allies in the status quo alignment, as much as to involve the latter parties with any approach to renew the nuclear deal with Iran.

Second, based on the enhanced awareness and the implications noted earlier, the United States should continue its engagement in the region and partnership with the status quo alignment there. That should not necessarily mean increased military presence in the region; instead, US engagement and partnership could make it less necessary to deploy forces there by signaling to the revisionists the United States' commitment to the status quo–aligned forces.[53] US engagement should ensure active involvement in conflict-resolution mechanisms of the ongoing conflicts, ranging from the Israeli-Palestinian conflict to the crises in Libya, Syria, Iraq, and Yemen. Partnership with the status quo–alignment parties would help avoid situations in which the positions of the United States and its allies diverge (as has been remarkably the case in Iran's nuclear deal and is also the case in Libya). Therefore, US engagement and partnership would not only counter the revisionist attempt to reshape the Middle East but also ensure that the conflict in the region between the two alignments would not escalate counter to US interests.

[52]Tarzi, *Strategic Benefits to the US and Israel*.

[53] Remarkably, a note of joint recommendations from leading think tanks in the US, UAE and Israel to the Biden administration explicitly called the new administration to review the US presence in the Middle East and "recommend how Arab-Israeli normalization can help secure the region"; Kirsten Fontenrose, Ebtesam Al-Ketbi and Udi Dekel, "How President Biden Can Tackle the Middle East's Biggest Problems," *The Atlantic Council*, Feb. 1, 2021, https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/how-president-biden-can-tackle-the-middle-easts-biggest-problems/.


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