

# AS ISRAEL LOOKS EAST, THE GULF IS BOTH A WAY STATION AND A DESTINATION

*Israelis and Gulf Arabs became closer amid shared fears of an aggressive and powerful administration in Tehran, which boasted of its influence over four Arab capitals (Baghdad, Damascus, Beirut, and Sana'a). With the signing of the Abraham Accords, states on the periphery of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict decided that the benefits of establishing relations with Israel outweighed the risks. They reasoned that if they advocated for increased coordination between Israel and the Arab world, it would increase pressure on the Palestinians to negotiate with Israel. This article focuses on the regional factors that led to the signing of the Abraham Accords and carefully reviews this important historical document.*

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### *Setting the Stage*

It would be a misnomer to suggest that the signature by the governments of Israel, the United Arab Emirates, and Bahrain (Morocco and possibly also Sudan also signed agreements but, for the purposes of this piece, we will address only the Gulf Arab signers) marked a radical departure from the status quo ante. In fact, the de facto relationship between Israel and the member states of the Gulf Cooperation Council had become increasingly transparent and expansive for years prior to the normalization process completed in 2020. Indeed, signs of changing attitudes toward Israel stretch as far back as the mid-1990s when both Qatar and Oman permitted the Israelis to open offices in their capitals (with Oman reciprocating with an office in Tel Aviv), and Oman also established the Middle East Desalination Research Center, a byproduct of the Madrid peace process, to include full Israeli participation.

At that point, the impetus for Doha and Muscat was to encourage moderation in Tel Aviv. In the wake of Itzhak Rabin's assassination in 1995, the two Gulf governments sent a signal that support for Shimon Peres' candidacy would bring benefits in the form of expanded relations within the Arab world. But the gambit failed and, when Benjamin Netanyahu's election in 1996 was followed quickly by renewed Israeli-Palestinian conflict, both the Qataris and Omanis quietly shut down the Israeli offices.

Despite their frustration over successive Israeli governments' hardline stances on resolving the conflict with Palestinians, the Gulf states continued to seek opportunities to advance the peace process. In particular, in the immediate aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attacks, amid pressure from the Bush administration to demonstrate a willingness to resolve what was perceived as the main grievance for millions of Arabs and Muslims against the U.S., Saudi King Abdullah tabled his Arab Peace Initiative in 2002. The initiative offered full, normal political, economic, and diplomatic relations between Israel and the Arab League member states in exchange for Israel's recognition of an independent Palestinian state with East Jerusalem as its capital and a resolution of the refugee issue on the basis of UNSCR 194. Although the Israeli government's response to the initiative has varied from outright rejection to a grudging acceptance that some elements could form the basis for negotiation, the API remains on the table and marks a significant step forward in acknowledging Israeli legitimacy.

That acknowledgment paved the way for subsequent steps towards rapprochement, characterized in particular by a confluence of views over regional political and security developments. Although neither side had a positive view of the Saddam Hussein regime in Iraq, both were unnerved by the results of the botched U.S.

invasion that overthrew Saddam but also brought a threatening rise in extremism and instability to the entire region. A mutual perception subsequently compounded the shared perception of U.S. mismanagement of critical aspects of regional security that the U.S. had contributed to further regional instability through its embrace of the Arab Spring popular uprisings against longstanding regional security anchors. Determined to push back against the rise of political movements in key capitals, especially the Muslim Brotherhood and its affiliates, which they saw as posing existential threats to their survival, the Gulf Arabs quietly turned to Israel to provide the capacity to track and undermine security threats.

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Against a backdrop of shared doubts about the credibility of U.S. regional security commitments, the Israelis and Gulf Arabs were increasingly drawn together by concerns over an aggressive and empowered regime in Tehran that boasted of its control over four Arab capitals — Baghdad, Damascus, Beirut, and Sana’a. Regional concerns were reinforced by the Obama administration’s decision to negotiate with the Iranian regime over its nuclear program. The agreement that was reached — the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action or JCPOA — was seen by both the Israelis and Gulf Arabs as weak. From an Israeli perspective, the JCPOA merely delayed but did not end the Iranian nuclear threat. From a Gulf Arab perspective, it failed to address what they saw as the core threats to their security from Iranian interference in their internal affairs, support for terrorism, and the development of threatening ballistic missiles. Even if starting from different points of concern, the two sides found collaboration to challenge the JCPOA, both internationally and within the U.S. political system, to be another area of mutual interest.

### ***The Trump Administration Seizes the Opening to Promote Cooperation***

The cooperation that had developed over the previous years provided a foundation

for the two sides to move a step closer to formalizing their relations when the Trump administration came into office in 2017. From the administration's earliest days, expressing scant interest in pursuing Israeli-Palestinian peacemaking, President Trump and his son-in-law, Jared Kushner, had touted the possibility of an "outside-in" approach to Middle East peacemaking. In their conception, promoting enhanced collaboration between Israel and Arabs would serve to pressure the Palestinians into concessions in negotiating with the Israelis. Although the effort would not be realized until nearing the end of Trump's term of office, the signing of the Abraham Accords was seen as an indicator that, for states on the periphery of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the advantages of establishing relations with Israel outweighed the disadvantages.

### ***The Abraham Accords and Deepening Security Cooperation***

The signing of the Abraham Accords agreements was widely perceived as an acknowledgment by the Gulf signatories that, differences over Palestine aside, the parties perceived a more urgent requirement to coordinate with Israel on shared concerns over Iranian malign regional behavior. As noted, the foundation for cooperation rested in part on their assessment of shared threat perspectives. But it also reflected a sense that, for the Gulf states, the U.S. was not the reliable guarantor of the security they had depended on in the past. The decision by the Obama administration to engage Iran on its nuclear weapons program and to prioritize negotiations with Tehran over confrontation unnerved both the Israelis and the Gulf governments. Repeated assertions by U.S. political leaders that Washington would reallocate resources away from the Middle East to address growing challenges in the Asia Pacific region from a rising China and manage the challenges of a revanchist Russia added to their unease. Thus, both sides sense an urgent need to shore up their defenses without a reliable U.S. security umbrella.

Despite their perceptions, the interest in aligning to confront an Iranian threat papered over the reality that their individual concerns about Iran were far more complicated. Unlike Israel, the Gulf states were not as concerned about an Iranian nuclear weapon, which was unlikely to be aimed at them. Instead, they focused on Iranian threats closer to home, including its interference in neighbors' internal affairs, its ballistic missile programs that could carry conventional as well as nuclear warheads, and support for terrorist movements that targeted them. Thus, while the Gulf states welcomed the Trump administration's decision to end its participation in the JCPOA and pursue its "maximum pressure" campaign aimed at forcing Iran to abandon its nuclear weapons program, they were still left with a U.S. policy that prioritized Chinese and Russian challenges and did not address the issues of

Iranian behavior most concerning to them. To their regret, the Trump administration proved no more willing to reinforce U.S. security guarantees than had the Obama administration except in its eagerness to sell additional weapons. This perception was reinforced by President Trump's insouciant "it's not my problem" reaction to the Iranian drone attacks on shipping in the UAE and the critical Abqaiq oil facility in Saudi Arabia. In response, the Gulf states pursued an option not available to Israel ... opening a channel of dialogue with the Iranians while insisting that their relations with Israel were not oriented towards confronting Iran.

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Nevertheless, the space for cooperation with Israel on regional security issues has opened further in the two years since the signing of the Abraham Accords and has included even those Gulf states, especially Saudi Arabia, that have not fully normalized their relations with Tel Aviv. The decision to transfer management of U.S.-Israel bilateral defense cooperation from the European Command to the Central Command has played an essential role in providing a venue for integrating Israel into regional security programs as it brings Israeli and Gulf Arab military leaders together in a joint planning forum. Iranian expansion into the Red Sea, particularly through its support to the Houthi rebels in Yemen, has provided further motivation for cooperation among the Gulf Arabs and Israel. The International Institute for Security Studies (IISS) reported in a paper prepared for the Manama Security Dialogue in 2022 that the U.S. had hosted a meeting of senior defense officials from Bahrain, Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE to discuss Iran's growing missile and UAV threats. On the ground, USCENTCOM organized a quadripartite naval exercise in November 2021 with U.S., Bahraini, Emirati, and Israeli naval forces participating. This was followed shortly afterward by a second exercise that also added participants from Oman and Saudi Arabia. Support for greater regional cooperation and the integration of security programs was a major theme of President Biden's visit to Israel and Saudi Arabia in July 2022. The U.S. role in mediating the successful completion of an agreement among Egypt, Israel, and Saudi Arabia to transfer control of Tiran and Sanafir islands, flashpoints in the 1967 War, from Egyptian to Saudi control marks a major milestone in enhancing regional security cooperation in the northern Red Sea.

More controversially, shared concerns about the rise of political Islamist groups, especially the Muslim Brotherhood, following the Arab Spring uprisings underscored greater interest in the region in coordinating with Israeli organizations, both public and private sector, in intelligence collection. Most notoriously, several Gulf states purchased Pegasus spyware from the Israeli NSO group that was used to surveil adversaries, real or imagined. Revelations of the use of the Pegasus spyware has generated concerns internationally and led to the NSO group being blacklisted in the U.S.

### ***The Negev Forum***

An early effort to institutionalize the Abraham Accords brought together foreign ministers from Israel, the UAE, and Bahrain along with their U.S., Moroccan, and Egyptian counterparts at the Israeli Negev town of Sde Boker. The original concept of the summit was to coordinate approaches to the Iranian threat. But the parties were eager to demonstrate that the normalization process was more than an anti-Iran coalition and that normalization with Israel could bring benefit to resolving other regional challenges, including the Israel-Palestine conflict. Thus, at a June 2022 meeting of the newly coined Negev Forum Steering Committee in Manama, the six parties agreed to coordinate on advancing a shared vision for regional development. To promote that cooperation, the parties agreed to form six working groups dealing with clean energy, education and coexistence, food and water security, health, regional security, and tourism.

### ***Economic Cooperation as an Aspect of the Abraham Accords***

Further to efforts to expand the scope of their newfound cooperation beyond security, Israel and the UAE, and Bahrain have emphasized measures to boost economic ties. Israel signed its first free trade agreement with an Arab state when it signed one with the UAE in May 2022. The two sides speculated that their bilateral trade would expand from \$1.2 billion to \$10 billion within five years. Under the terms of the FTA, the parties would undertake immediate or gradual tax exemptions on 96 percent of trade on food, cosmetics, medical equipment, and medicine, among other categories. Of all of the Arab signatories to normalization agreements with Israel, the UAE has the most sophisticated private sector. It is thus best placed to profit from collaboration with the Israeli private sector. The UAE-Israel Business Council has forecast that over 1,000 Israeli companies would be working in and through the UAE by the end of 2022. An Israeli venture capital platform, OurCrowd, has opened an office in Abu Dhabi, where it intends to finance an Artificial Intelligence research and development facility. In addition, there have been several government-to-government agreements covering cooperation on military drone technology, and a plan to build solar energy and water desalination plants on either side of the Jordan River.

Although Bahrain lags well behind the UAE in its private sector development — bilateral trade only reached \$7.5 million in 2021 — the Bahrainis are seeking to finalize an FTA with Israel by the end of 2022. Additional negotiations are anticipated for November. The Bahrainis particularly see scope for expansion of their tourism sector with Israeli visitors.

### *And the Others*

Aside from Kuwait, which has remained committed to the approach outlined by the Arab Peace Initiative or API (see above), the remaining Gulf Cooperation Council member states have advanced de facto relations with Israel to one extent or another. As noted above, both Oman and Qatar were early leaders in the region in opening doors for the Israelis, beginning in the 1990s. More recently, the two sides have engaged in additional conversations about normalization, including opening Omani airspace to Israeli commercial aviation, but the Omanis have emphasized their preference for “quiet diplomacy.” Israel also invited Oman to participate in the Negev Forum. Although that hasn’t happened, as noted above, Omani naval units did participate in a quadripartite exercise organized by the U.S. Central Command, in late 2021.

Similarly, Israeli-Qatari relations have warmed in the two years since the signing of the Abraham Accords but full normalization does not appear to be on the immediate horizon. Qatar permits Israeli commercial enterprises to operate in Doha and allowed Tel Aviv to open a representative office during the 2022 World Cup to handle citizen services for those Israelis who travel to Doha as spectators. Although the two sides have cooperated on issues related to Gaza in recent years, Qatar’s relationship with Hamas is an obstacle to further advances in their bilateral relations.

The crown jewel of post-Abraham Accords normalization agreements, of course, would be with Saudi Arabia. Beginning in the waning days of the Trump administration, the Saudis have been pressed to expand their ties with Israel but until now the Saudis have resisted and have re-emphasized their commitment to the Arab Peace Initiative, which the late Saudi King Abdullah introduced at the Beirut Arab League summit in 2002. Nevertheless, Riyadh has taken several steps to cement its ties to Tel Aviv, including expanded military and commercial links. In an effort that is of significant value to the Israeli economy, the Saudis announced in the summer that they would open their airspace to Israeli civilian aircraft, providing the Israelis with direct access to Asian destinations. The Saudis also permitted for the first-time direct travel by charter aircraft from Israel for Hajj participants. Israel’s agreement to transfer sovereign control for the Sanafir and Tiran islands from Egypt

to Saudi Arabia reflects the warming ties between the two states.

### *The Way Forward – Expansion or Retreat?*

Two years after the signing of the Abraham Accords, it appears unlikely that there will be additional signings of normalization agreements soon with the remaining GCC member states. For Saudi Arabia, particularly, full normalization would present problems in its aspirations to leadership of the entire Arab and Islamic worlds where normalization with Israel remains controversial for many. Nevertheless, regional ties to Israel are becoming increasingly routine and overt. The parties cooperate on a broad array of shared security concerns and businesspeople increasingly pursue cooperative commercial links. Especially for more sophisticated economies like the UAE, economic integration with Israel offers substantial benefits and, on high-tech programs, can be a U.S.-approved alternative to greater dependence on China.

But the way forward to greater regional cooperation is not a given. Although there are no signs of substantial hostility, there also does not appear to be a great deal of popular support among Gulf citizens for the opening to Israel, while sympathy for the Palestinians remains high. Moreover, the potential advent of a hard-right Israeli government has clearly concerned the Gulf leadership, with UAE Foreign Minister Abdullah bin Zayed reportedly warning prospective Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu of the possible damage to Israeli-UAE relations if known Jewish supremacists are included in the new government. The relatively quick end to the 2021 Israel-Gaza conflict allowed the Abraham Accords signatories to avoid being drawn into it. But a prolonged deterioration of the Israel-Palestine relationship, or a rise of clearly discriminatory actions against Palestinians, especially if they involve the Haram al-Sharif, could provoke a widespread backlash in the region and force governments to re-calculate their relations with Israel. Recent Jewish settler violence against Palestinians in Hebron is a potential harbinger of a more troubled future. Under those circumstances, it may be the Arab Peace Initiative rather than the Abraham Accords that proves to be the more sustainable approach to broader Israeli-Arab peace.