

COMPLEMENTARY FACETS: TÜRKİYE-ISRAEL RELATIONS AND THE ABRAHAM ACCORDS

The Abraham Accords between Israel and four Arab states in 2020 were seen negatively and heavily criticized by Türkiye. At the time they were signed, some interpreted them as a balancing act not only against the rising Iranian threat, but also against Türkiye's growing activism in the region. However, less than two years later, after Türkiye began normalizing its relations with the United Arab Emirates and with Israel, there appear to be several complementary aspects between the Abraham Accords and the Türkiye-UAE and Türkiye-Israel normalization processes. Still, there is room to push even further for trilateral cooperation between Türkiye-Israel-UAE, as these are among the economic powerhouses in the region.

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In August 2022, Türkiye and Israel decided to return high-level diplomatic representation to the respective country and normalize ties between the states. The current attempt at normalization comes at a time when Israel is developing a new set of relationships, most notably with some of the Arab Gulf states. At the same time Ankara is also emphasizing improving relations with these same actors. How do these processes relate to one another? Which aspects are contradictory and which are complementary? Can these processes be combined? While currently these normalizations are occurring in parallel, one may envision trilateral cooperation among the actors in the future. More specifically, there is potential for Israel-UAE-Türkiye to join hands, as these are all regional economic powerhouses, and this may prove to be the leading route for furthering regional cooperation.

Three Normalizations

At the beginning of 2020, Israel and the UAE did not have diplomatic relations with each other, and both countries had tense relations with Türkiye. Between 2020 and 2022, three normalizations happened in parallel, between Jerusalem and Abu Dhabi, Ankara and Abu Dhabi, and Jerusalem and Ankara, and dramatically changed the situation.

Signed in 2020 under the impulsion of U.S. President Donald Trump, the Abraham Accords opened new opportunities for defense and security cooperation between Israel and the UAE. They offered additional possibilities for cooperation on shared interests, including energy, food and water security, and health (together with Morocco and Bahrain, while the agreement with Sudan is yet to be materialized). After the resolution of the Qatar crisis in January 2021, Türkiye moved to normalize its relations with the UAE. In November 2021, the UAE Crown Prince came for a visit in Türkiye, which was Türkiye's first major success in its 'charm offensive' to repair relations with the countries in the region. A reciprocate visit of the President of Türkiye, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, in the UAE took place in February 2022. Concerning Türkiye's relations with Israel, President Erdogan had already voiced his desire to repair relations with Israel in December 2020. Israel was cautious in its response to the Turkish overtures since it felt burnt by the collapse of the previous normalization agreement in 2018.

Besides the significant work of the President of Israel, Isaac Herzog, as an indispensable avenue of communication between the sides, three events contributed to the rebuilding of trust between the Israeli side and the Turkish side – one was the quick release of the Israeli tourists that were arrested in Türkiye on the charge of

espionage in November 2021, the second was the cooperation between the Israeli and Turkish intelligence services to quell Iranian plans to harm Israelis on Turkish soil in June 2022 and lastly an aviation agreement was signed in July 2022, in which after more than a decade of disagreement on the subject, Türkiye agreed to Israeli security procedures with regard to Israeli air carriers flying out of Türkiye. These events added to the ongoing discussion over Hamas military activity on Turkish soil, which, while still a point of contention, is an area where Türkiye seems to be attentive to some of Israel's demands.¹

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From A Zero-Sum Game to Complementary Processes

The normalization between Türkiye and Israel and the normalization between the UAE and Israel, as part of the Abraham Accords, have had complex connections.

On the one hand, the Abraham Accords and Turkish-Israeli relations have appeared as a zero-sum game in specific fields. First, it weakened the symbolic value of Ankara in the eyes of Israel. When Türkiye recognized Israel in 1949 *de facto* and in 1950 *de jure*, it was then the first Muslim-majority country to do so, and it remained for a long time the only country in the Middle East that acted in this manner. The peace agreements signed with Egypt and Jordan had ended this Turkish exceptionalism, even though Israeli-Jordanian and Israeli-Egyptian relations did not develop as some of the peacemakers had hoped. The Abraham accords, whose name alludes to religious history, dealt an additional blow to the Turkish symbolic value for Israel. With these agreements, good relations with Türkiye are not a key for Israel's integration within its region or within the Muslim world.

In the economic field too, there is a certain competition between Türkiye and the UAE from an Israeli point of view. Abu Dhabi and Dubai present themselves as an

¹ Ahmad Abu Amer, “Hamas Fears Setback in Warming of Israel-Turkey Ties,” *Al Monitor* 15 March 2022, [Hamas fears setback in warming of Israel-Turkey ties - Al-Monitor: Independent, trusted coverage of the Middle East](#)

alternative to Istanbul both as touristic destinations and as aviation hubs on the way to the Far East. Similarly, the development of energy links between Israel and the UAE could be at the expense of Türkiye. All these fields are considered crucial for the Turkish economy.

Finally, at the time the Abraham accords were signed, some interpreted them as a balancing act not only against the rising Iranian threat but also against Türkiye's growing activism in the Middle East and the Eastern Mediterranean, where Ankara supported the UAE's rivals, like in Libya or in Qatar, and threatened Israel's new friends in Athens and Nicosia.²

Therefore, Ankara's first reaction to the Abraham accords was negative and echoed the Palestinian criticism of the accords. Türkiye objected to the Abraham accords and threatened in August 2020 to suspend diplomatic ties with the UAE and pull out its ambassador from the country as a reaction to the accords.³ The political cost of the threat was not that high at the time because it was anyhow still in the context of the Qatar crisis, in which Türkiye backed Doha against the other Gulf States. Either way, Türkiye did not follow through on its threats.

With the change of tone in Turkish policy at the end of 2020 and in 2021, part of this zero-sum game was transformed.⁴ Following the aggravation of its regional isolation, accentuated by the election of Joe Biden to the White House and the worsening of the crisis shaking its economy, Türkiye adopted a conciliatory tone and reached out towards all its neighbors in the region, among others, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Israel, and the UAE. By choosing to bandwagon the regional alignments happening around it, Ankara thus changed the determinants and the relations between the three normalizations, as mentioned earlier.

Israel's response to Türkiye's appeal also proved that Ankara remained important for Jerusalem's regional policy. The fact that the Israeli government, after some hesitations, answered the Turkish call and accepted to normalize the relations between the two countries within less than two years shows that even the Abraham accords had not revoked Türkiye's importance for Israeli decision leaders. Moreover, compared to the aftermath of the 2016 normalization agreement between Israel and Türkiye, there was a much more impressive list of high-level meetings in the context

² Nurşin Ateşoğlu Güney and Vişne Korkmaz, "A New Alliance Axis in the Eastern Mediterranean Cold War: What the Abraham Accords Mean for Mediterranean Geopolitics and Turkey," *Insight Turkey*, 9 March 2021.

³ Daren Butler and Tuvan Gumrukcu, "Turkey May Suspend Ties with UAE over Israel Deal, Erdogan Says," *Reuters*, 14 August 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-israel-emirates-turkey-idUSKCN25A00N>

⁴ Gokhan Cinkara, "Interpreting Turkey's Current Diplomatic Rapprochement Toward the Gulf," *Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington*, 22 March 2022.

of the 2022 normalization – starting already in March 2022 with the visit of President Herzog to Türkiye, followed by Foreign Minister Yair Lapid’s visit to Türkiye in June. A meeting between Prime Minister Lapid and President Erdogan in New York in September, a visit of Israel’s Minister of Economy and Industry in October in Türkiye, Israel’s Minister of Defense visited Ankara in late October, where he met his counterpart and Erdogan, and in November Israel’s Minister of Tourism visited Türkiye. The visit of the Defense Minister was quite a surprising development as it was assumed that Türkiye and Israel would find it hard to cooperate again in the defense realm.

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The normalizations happening since 2020 have strengthened one another. In particular, the end of Turkish hostility to the normalization between Israel and its neighbors had decreased the regional pressure on the normalizing countries. The three processes have both benefitted from and strengthened the atmosphere of reconciliation that has characterized the Middle East since 2020.

Two Different Models of Normalization

For Türkiye, the normalization with Israel and with the UAE had strong similarities. It meant for Erdogan a need to radically change his narrative on two countries that he had presented as regional threats. Benjamin Netanyahu and Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan were frequent targets of the Turkish president’s diatribes. However, by presenting his moves as led by realistic motives, he could justify the two U-turns that the normalization with Jerusalem and Abu Dhabi were.

For Israel, on the contrary, the normalization with the UAE and the normalization with Türkiye had very different characteristics.

In the case of the normalization with Türkiye, this was more the rebuilding of

broken ties. Despite their ups and downs, diplomatic ties with Türkiye had never been severed. Trade between the two countries has grown in almost a linear manner in the past decade making Türkiye one of Israel's most important trade partners and Israel a significant trade partner of Türkiye.⁵ After a sharp fall in the early 2010s in the number of Israeli tourists traveling to Türkiye, tourism numbers bounced back towards the end of the decade. Intelligence cooperation also remained, albeit on a much smaller scale than was in the 1990s. After Türkiye lifted its veto on Israel's participation in NATO activities in 2016, this was another venue where the countries cooperated, although limitedly.

However, these existing paths for cooperation were balanced by a decade of significant tensions between the two countries. The flotilla incident in May 2010, which resulted in Israeli defense forces killing nine Turkish citizens, caused a shock to bilateral relations. Although relations were tense between the countries from 2008 in the context of Israel's first operation in Gaza, *Operation Cast Lead*., the flotilla incident was an unprecedented case in which Israel killed Turkish citizens.

Despite the attempt to normalize the situation between the two countries, encouraged by the U.S. President Barack Obama's visit to Israel in 2013, which led to a short-lived normalization agreement in 2016, the relations between Türkiye and Israel during the 2011-2021 decade were characterized by numerous points of friction. The rapprochement between Israel, Greece and the Republic of Cyprus, in itself a consequence of Ankara's assertive tone, was seen in Türkiye as creating a threatening axis. In various Middle-Eastern conflicts, Ankara and Jerusalem found themselves on opposed sides, like in Egypt, where Erdogan supported former President Mohamed Morsi. At the same time, Israel-Egypt relations experienced a significant improvement under the rule of Abdel Fattah El-Sisi. Moreover, the good links between Türkiye and Hamas and Ankara's growing involvement in Jerusalem were negatively perceived by Israel.

Although the Abraham Accords came after years-long discrete contacts between the two sides, Israeli-Emirati relations were in a sense empty when they were signed, both of positive and negative elements—as such, analyzing both processes together also means comparing an enthusiastic, pioneer-spirited, normalization from scratch and improving relations that were once deep and broad but were shadowed by later intense, although indirect or rhetoric, showdowns leading to mistrust between the sides. In other words, can the existing links between Israel and Türkiye be such assets that they balance a decade of antagonism and serve as more efficient fuel than

⁵ Lahav Harkov, "Israel to Reopen Trade Office in Istanbul in a Further Sign of Warming Ties," *Jerusalem Post*, 6 July 2022, [Israel to reopen trade office in Istanbul, in sign of warming ties - The Jerusalem Post \(jpost.com\)](https://www.jpost.com/Israel-to-reopen-trade-office-in-istanbul-in-sign-of-warming-ties)

the positive spirit driving Israeli-Emirati relations?

Given the longevity of Turkish-Israeli relations, one can argue that this relationship has particular strengths and prevailed despite different challenges. The existing framework between Ankara and Jerusalem has proved valuable in normalizing the relations. President Herzog's personal contacts with Turkish officials created a good basis for his visit to Türkiye in March 2022. Similarly, the relaunch of security cooperation between the two countries relied on existing models, although people activating them had changed. Although an important symbolic step, the decision to exchange ambassadors between the two countries in August 2022 was easy to implement since it needed only to come back to a previous situation.

As such, in the short term, Türkiye and Israel's common past has enabled a smoother improvement of their bilateral relations that only needed to be put back on track compared to the Israeli-Emirati relations that had to be built (almost) from zero. However, it remains doubtful if, in the long term, both countries will be able to overcome all their points of frictions while the Jerusalem-Abu Dhabi normalization benefits from the voluntarism shown by both sides.

Between Washington and Ramallah

Beyond the dynamics shaping the development of Israel's relations with Türkiye and the UAE, the two processes may be impacted by developments in the U.S. and the Palestinian territories.

Türkiye, the UAE, and Israel are three countries with essential links to Washington. Israel sees its most important ally in the U.S., and the U.S. administrations have underlined again and again the significance they give to Israel's security as a critical partner in the Middle East. The UAE is also important ally for the Americans, as a significant knot between key strategic arenas and the U.S. support is a major consideration in Abu Dhabi's policy. Despite more tense relations with the U.S. in the last decade, Türkiye remains a crucial NATO member.

The U.S. has played a vital role, sometimes even without actively intervening, in the various normalization processes. This role was pronounced in the case of the Abraham Accords, pushed by Trump and signed in Washington. At a time when the continued U.S. presence in the Middle East remains an issue of debate, both in the U.S. and in the Middle East, opinions differ as if these agreements are an additional U.S. commitment to the region or an attempt to strengthen local allies' cooperation and enable a U.S. withdrawal.

The meeting of Prime Minister Lapid and President Erdogan in New York also highlights the importance of the U.S. angle to Turkish-Israeli relations, with Ankara considering that the road to Washington goes through Jerusalem. While the last three U.S. administrations differed in the level of their involvement in trying to repair Turkish-Israeli relations, it seems clear that Washington favors Jerusalem and Ankara working together. The same can be said of the Turkish-Emirati normalization. However, it is uncertain how long the U.S. will play a positive role in these various processes. Despite Turkish efforts, Ankara and Washington have not fully repaired their relations, and dissensions remain, like the blocking by the U.S. Congress of the Turkish purchase of F-16 fighter jets, the Turkish opposition to the entry of Sweden and Finland to NATO, or the Kurdish issue. The UAE has shown certain autonomy in its foreign policy by developing relations with China beyond what Washington would have wanted. Despite its strong foundations, fragilities have started to appear also in U.S.-Israeli relations.

Given these elements, the normalizations between Israel, Türkiye, and the UAE may have to face a situation in which the U.S. impulse decreases or disappears or, like in the case of an open crisis between Ankara and Washington, the U.S. factor plays against them.

Another important factor is the Palestinian issue. Over the years, Türkiye-Israel relations have been affected by developments in the Israel-Palestinian arena. President Erdogan has positioned himself as one of the most important pro-Palestinian leaders in the Middle East. The UAE also claims that they remain true to the Palestinian cause and the two-state solution.

Both countries have shown since the improvement of their relations with Israel that they could deal with low-intensity cycles of violence between Israelis and Palestinians without severely hurting the ties with Israel. They have also found ways to compensate for the normalizations with gestures towards the Palestinians, at the UN for example.

It is also important to underline that Ankara and Abu Dhabi do not focus on the same Palestinian players. While the UAE has a solid anti-Hamas stance, the group has Türkiye's support. This situation makes it easier for Israel to discuss the Palestinian issue with Emiratis than with Turks. However, an optimistic scenario of the normalizations could include a bridging role of Ankara and Abu Dhabi between the Palestinian groups themselves and with Israel.

As far as more pessimistic scenarios are concerned, Israel's current normalizations

with Türkiye and the UAE have not had the test of an intense showdown between Israel and Palestinians. Such a deflagration or an event focused on Jerusalem, whose probability has increased with the return of Netanyahu to power in Israel and his right-wing coalition, could have repercussions on the relations between Jerusalem and Ankara or Abu Dhabi. Tracks of contacts that do not go directly through the government, like President Herzog, could end up being a key in the capacity of Israel to limit these repercussions.

Looking Ahead

So far, the situation in the region is one of the parallel normalizations or re-normalizations happening simultaneously rather than the construction of a real triangle or regional cooperation. Each partner seems to prefer dealing with the others within the framework of bilateral relations.

However, growing cooperation between the Arab Gulf states, Türkiye, and Israel can lead to several initiatives that will benefit regional stability. Since the Middle East is a ‘hotspot’ and the effects of climate change are worse in this region, there is also much room for cooperation in the region in mitigating the effects of climate change. As the UAE will host the next UN Climate Change Conference (COP 28), this also opens room for trilateral UAE-Israel-Türkiye environmental cooperation. As Türkiye’s trucks usage of Israel’s roads to bypass Syria previously exemplified,⁶ land and rail routes connection between the Gulf and Israel can be beneficial. The decision of the U.S. central command (CENTCOM) to absorb Israel into its area of responsibility instead of the European command also opens more opportunities for regional cooperation that Türkiye may have an interest to be involved in. Cross-border initiatives that sell religious pilgrimage packages can also be an exciting way to proceed.

Although each of the countries has a different approach to Iran’s regional ambitions and diverse points of frictions with them, Iran’s becoming a nuclear threshold state and its regional policies are a growing concern.⁷ Israel is particularly worried by the strengthening of an Iranian axis from Teheran to Beirut, Türkiye and Iran are rivals in Syria and in Northern Iraq, and the results of the second Nagorno Karabagh war have caused growing tensions between Iran and Azerbaijan – a conflict in which both Israel and Türkiye side with Baku. The UAE sees Iran as the main threat to its national security. The UAE has reacted by developing a range of defensive responses

⁶ Ari Rabinovitch and Tova Cohen, “Truck by Truck, Israel Builds Trade Gateway to Arab world,” *Reuters*, 1 July 2014, [Truck by truck, Israel builds trade gateway to Arab world | Reuters](#)

⁷ Fehim Tastekin, “Iran Emerges as Catalyst for Closer Ties on Turkey-UAE-Israel Triangle,” *Al Monitor*, 8 February 2022, [Iran emerges as catalyst for closer ties on Turkey-UAE-Israel triangle - Al-Monitor: Independent, trusted coverage of the Middle East](#)

while simultaneously seeking to maintain open economic and diplomatic ties with Iran as much as possible. The UAE's efforts to draw closer to Iran are also designed to balance its image as cooperating with Israel on intelligence and operational matters. Still, while the Iranian threat has been an essential drive in Israel's normalizations with Türkiye and the UAE, the capacity of each country to mobilize the others against Teheran remains unclear. Nonetheless, the fact that these three actors now have more formalized avenues to share information is a possible constraint on Iran's regional ambitions.