

# ISRAEL'S RIGHTWARD PULL VERSUS REGIONAL RAPPROCHEMENT

*The Abraham Accords of 2020 were Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's proudest foreign policy achievement. They were applauded in Israel and the United States but were met with more skepticism by the Arab public because they lacked any satisfaction of Palestinian demands for statehood. Netanyahu, who won Israel's recent election and is slated to become prime minister once again as soon as his government is in place, would like to enlarge the Accords signatories to more Arab states, especially Saudi Arabia, but may be stymied by his far-right coalition partners, whose agenda is based on expanding settlements, annexing the West Bank with no regard for its Palestinian population, and making Israel more religiously Jewish. This will almost certainly lead to violence, perhaps even a new intifada, as the West Bank is already seething. Western and Arab leaders have expressed their concern about the leaders of Israel's far right parties, some with histories of violence, becoming government ministers. There is good reason to believe that not only are the Accords unlikely to expand but, rather, may contract if Arab leaders see headlines of violence, with Palestinians being killed by Israeli forces. The government must be formed by mid-December and while Netanyahu will lead it, its policies may destroy the Accords, his pride and joy.*

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**I**srael's once and now presumptive prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, may face new and challenging internal obstacles to his presumed hopes for expanding the Abraham Accords, his signature foreign policy achievement in 2020 (along with then-President Trump). The Accords themselves appeared unexpectedly at a critical moment in August of that year, just when he was widely expected to annex part of the West Bank, pursuant to President Trump's invitation to do so. Instead, to the world's astonishment, he unexpectedly announced that diplomatic relations were to be opened between Israel and the United Arab Emirates. It was generally understood that this was pursuant to a quid pro quo: Israel would not annex, and the UAE would extend diplomatic relations. Its example was shortly followed by Morocco and Bahrain, which received their own quid pro quos<sup>1</sup> via the United States. This initiative was christened as the Abraham Accords.

The Accords were immediately and almost universally popular in Israel, though much less so in the Arab world, including among the populace of Israel's new diplomatic partners. Like previous treaties with Egypt and Jordan, these are government-to-government affairs, and the public gets little say. Netanyahu and other rightist politicians proclaimed that this had finally proved their long-held conviction that Israeli-Palestinian peace was not the necessary prelude to a broader Israeli-Arab peace, insisting that the new diplomatic facts spoke for themselves. Meanwhile, Palestinian President Abbas denounced the Abraham Accords. The Palestinian Authority has held itself completely aloof from them and from projects begun under their framework, such as a tripartite electricity for water deal<sup>2</sup> between Israel and Jordan, financed by the UAE. Israeli vacationers soon flocked to the beaches of Abu Dhabi and Israeli businessmen and government officials became regular visitors to Gulf states, including those that did not yet have relations with Israel, such as Saudi Arabia, Oman, and Qatar, which reportedly hosted 30,000 Israelis for the World Cup.<sup>3</sup>

In the immediate prelude to the current situation, after its 4th election in two years, Israel formed a short-lived "Government of Change" in June 2021 in place of Netanyahu's, which likewise celebrated the Abraham Accords. However, it was unable to expand them to other Arab states. Some speculated that President Biden's visit to Saudi Arabia in July 2022 might herald such relations but, predictably,

<sup>1</sup> Joel Singer, "The Abraham Accords: Normalization Agreements Signed by Israel with the U.A.E., Bahrain, Sudan, and Morocco," *International Legal Materials*, Vol. 60, No. 3 (2021): p. 448–63. doi:10.1017/ilm.2021.18

<sup>2</sup> Bruce Riedel and Natan Sachs, "ORDER FROM CHAOS: Israel, Jordan, And The UAE's Energy Deal Is Good News," *Brookings*, 23 November 2021. <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2021/11/23/israel-jordan-and-the-uaes-energy-deal-is-good-news/>

<sup>3</sup> "30,000 Israelis to travel to Qatar for World Cup," *Middle East Monitor*, 8 November 2022. <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20221108-30000-israelis-to-travel-to-qatar-for-world-cup/>

nothing occurred beyond the famous fist bump. Instead, relations between the U.S. and Saudi Arabia sharply worsened in October, 2022, when Riyadh, together with Russia and the OPEC+ nations, announced a production cut, with the ostensible goal of keeping the price high. The U.S. government cried betrayal and vowed retaliation for its humiliation, though it now is carrying out a re-evaluation<sup>4</sup> of the relationship. Israel has wisely remained uninvolved and still hoped that the expected recognition might occur, perhaps when the aged and ailing nominal King, Salman bin Abdul Aziz, passes away and Mohammed bin Sultan becomes king of the country he has ruled in all but name since 2015.

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The Abraham Accords did not overjoy two utterly disparate groups of Jewish Israelis. The far right, composed of extreme nationalists, most of whom combine it with religion, has since 1967 sought the official annexation of the West Bank by Israel, regarding it as the ancient heartland of the Jewish people which the State of Israel must retain at all costs. Certainly, no part of it could be turned into a Palestinian state, the solution overwhelmingly preferred by the world community, but which had long been abandoned as a serious option by most Israelis, and never even considered by the right. Netanyahu himself has no use for a Palestinian state, but through his whole political career has invariably sought to maintain the status quo, with Israelis free to settle in the 132 existing “official” settlements and 147 outposts<sup>5</sup> (unofficial settlements tacitly allowed by recent Israeli governments), with a settler population in 2021 of 465,000 (not including East Jerusalem). The far right regards Netanyahu’s comparative pragmatism as politically and religiously unacceptable, but has been willing to tie itself politically to him as the paramount figure on the Israeli right since he returned to the prime minister’s office in 2009.

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<sup>4</sup> Jonathan Guyer, “Why America can’t seem to quit Saudi Arabia,” *Vox*, 17 November 2022. <https://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/2022/11/17/23423031/why-america-cant-seem-to-quit-saudi-arabia>

<sup>5</sup> Peace Now, “Data: Population,” *Peace Now*, <https://peacenow.org.il/en/settlements-watch/settlements-data/population>

The far right had to bide its time through 2021-22 while the anti-Netanyahu “Government of Change” was in power. Although the prime minister for most of its tenure was Naphtali Bennett, leader of a different far-right party formally committed to annexation, the government was constrained by the coalition agreement with its disparate partners, including two small center-left parties and an Arab and Islamist one, to take no new steps regarding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The extreme right, represented by the Religious Zionism party, sitting in the opposition during the Change Government, had to wait for the next election in hopes of a Netanyahu government in which it could exert some leverage.

The other group dismayed by the Abraham Accords was the political opposite of Religious Zionism, namely, the shrunken Israeli left, whose main *raison d’être* since the 1980s had been the pursuit of an Israeli-Palestinian peace based (for most of them) on a two-state solution. They had long ridiculed the notion, increasingly championed by Netanyahu, that peace with the Arab world was possible without prior reconciliation with the Palestinians. When the Abraham Accords suddenly turned the tables, they could not denounce it, but have not yet formulated a policy that takes into account the apparent abandonment of the Palestinians by many of the western-oriented Arab states, in return for a peace based on a shared anti-Iranian belligerence, plus presumed economic benefits. It should be noted that this is not the so-called “Zionist Left,” represented by the Meretz and Labor parties, which had reservations about the Accords but voted for them anyway. Instead, it was the now-defunct Joint List, represented in the new Knesset by the predominantly Arab Hadash-Taal party, as well as non-parliamentary groups such as the website 972.<sup>6</sup> Most attention has focused on the alarm felt by the Accords’ Arab signatories. Still, there is also reason for concern that the Israeli far-right might bring them down in pursuit of its traditional objective to secure and settle a Greater Israel.

It is a political curiosity that the left and right are apparently aligned regarding the Accords, but only the right’s opposition is of political significance. That became painfully obvious in the election of 1 November 2022, which brought the pro-Netanyahu bloc back to power with a comfortable 65-seat majority in the 120-seat Knesset.

This article is written amid the coalition negotiations that will decide on the makeup of the new government as well as its policies. Netanyahu, confident in his ability to control his coalition partners, had publicly assured the country that these negotiations, unlike most in Israel, would be finished in two weeks, but they are

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<sup>6</sup> Haggai Matar, “If you’re pro-peace, reject this peace,” *+972 Magazine*, 29 October 2020. <https://www.972mag.com/zionist-left-netanyahu-abraham-accords/>

currently deadlocked. While the ultimate result can't be predicted, the battle lines are clear, and the new government's probable policies, enforced on Netanyahu by his coalition partners from the far right, will likely seriously impact the future of the Abraham Accords and possibly its relationships with a host of other countries, perhaps including the United States.

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It should be noted that most Israeli rightwing extremists have nothing inherently against Israeli peace with Arab countries. Unlike an old stereotype of Zionism as essentially expansionist, they do not seek to acquire or control land outside the borders of the historic Land of Israel.<sup>7</sup> They are neutral to positive on the Abraham Accords, so long as Israel has a free hand in the religiously defined “Land of Israel.” And therein lies the problem,<sup>8</sup> and the complications. There is good reason for concern that the Israeli far-right might bring down the Abraham Accords in pursuit of its traditional objective to secure and settle a “Greater Israel”.

Three weeks after the election, Religious Zionism dissolved into its original three component parties: a shrunken Religious Zionism (7 seats), led by Bezalel Smotrich,<sup>9</sup> who emphasizes changing Israel into a state governed by Jewish religious law; the Jewish Power party (6 seats), led by Itamar Ben-Gvir, who, like his mentor, Meir Kahane advocates suppressing Arabs, whether in Israel proper or in the

<sup>7</sup> There is a partial exception with regard to Jordan, the western part of which was indeed specified in the Bible as being part of the “promised land,” and all of Jordan was included in the original Palestine mandate from the League of Nations in 1922. Though the Israeli right used to sing about owning the “two banks of the Jordan,” this now appears to be a political dead letter.

<sup>8</sup> Meron Rapoport, “Israel: Netanyahu asked the world to forget the occupation. Ben-Gvir wants it front and centre,” *Middle East Eye*, 22 November 2022, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/israel-netanyahu-ask-world-forget-occupation-ben-gvir-front-centre>

<sup>9</sup> Ben Caspit, “US apprehensive Netanyahu will nominate far-right defense minister,” *al-monitor*, 15 November 2022. <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2022/11/us-apprehensive-netanyahu-will-nominate-far-right-defense-minister>

West Bank; and Noam (1 seat), whose primary goal is awakening Israelis to the existential danger of LGBTQ+ rights (Israel is generally progressive in this area). They combined under pressure from Netanyahu before the election, who was afraid that separately one might fall below the minimum vote threshold of 3.25 percent (as actually happened to two leftwing parties, thus inflating Netanyahu's Knesset majority). They do not disagree on policy but their emphases, and even more the personalities of their leaders, differ and frequently clash. However, the dissolution should help Netanyahu, who will be under less pressure to give major ministerial posts to smaller parties than to the second-largest coalition member.

Ben-Gvir was technically number two in Religious Zionism, but he is the current phenomenon and bad boy of Israeli politics, wielding more power than his position now as leader of the coalition's second smallest party (after Noam) should entitle him. When he was 18, the Israeli army refused to draft him, citing his extremist associations, and he was later convicted of incitement to riot. For decades, he was closely associated with Meir Kahane's followers, the extremist Israeli-American rabbi and one-time Knesset member who was assassinated in 1991. Kahane advocated expulsion of Arabs from Israel and a racist program that has been compared to the Nazi Nuremberg laws. Ben-Gvir has ostensibly moderated his views in the last year to avoid what Kahane had suffered: exclusion from running for the Knesset because of extremist views. The difference is that Kahane was ostentatiously ignored and isolated by all other Knesset members in the 1980's while Ben-Gvir is a power broker and about to become a minister.

The most significant dispute, however, in the messy process of forming a government has been over Smotrich's demand that he be made Defense Minister or, as a second choice, Finance Minister. These are significant posts, that usually go to either the coalition's dominant partner (not infrequently kept by the Prime Minister) or the leader of a major party. The former almost invariably goes to a very senior general-turned-politician (such as the incumbent from the outgoing government, former IDF Chief of Staff Benny Gantz) or occasionally to a very experienced national security figure. Smotrich's military experience was as a clerk, and a majority of Israelis consider him unfit for the job, Netanyahu contends that the Finance Ministry has been promised to the Sephardi ultra-Orthodox party Shas, with 11 seats now the Likud's largest coalition partners. It now appears Smotrich will get Finance, or perhaps serve in a rotation<sup>10</sup> with Shas's leader, Aryeh Deri. But the real reason

<sup>10</sup> Michael Hauser Tov, "Likud Demands Ministry Legal Adviser Revamp; Dery, Smotrich Mull Finance Ministry Rotation," *Haaretz*, 22 November 2022. <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/2022-11-22/ty-article/premium/negotiations-continue-over-proposal-to-rotate-finance-ministry-between-dery-and-smotrich/00000184-a084-d199-ade4-ebc778340000>

Netanyahu is determined<sup>11</sup> not to allow the far right to have the defense ministry, apart from Smotrich incessantly criticizing him, relates directly to the Abraham Accords.

Apart from being responsible for the IDF, the defense minister is also the virtual ruler of the West Bank and of all the Palestinians living there. The territory is under military control (even the portion nominally governed by the Palestinian Authority) and all policies and practices affecting its inhabitants are under the jurisdiction of the defense minister, including settlement permissions and policies, to the extent not specified by legislation. Smotrich wants to control<sup>12</sup> this, which is what he has promised his constituency, and he makes no secret of his intention to expand settlements and crack down hard on the Palestinian population. Netanyahu, who has always supported settlements, has nevertheless kept some limits on them and attempted to avoid what might be seen as “excessive” violence because he tries to keep Israel’s relations with the world community – especially the U.S. of course – from deteriorating too far. Since 2020 this has also included improving relations with the Abraham Accords countries. It will be much harder to achieve this balance with the far right inside the government, and Netanyahu has already agreed<sup>13</sup> to legalize settlement in an area in the northern West Bank that was banned in 2005. Abraham Accords countries do not want to see headlines like that, especially not about violence against Palestinians.

Netanyahu rightly fears that with the actions Smotrich could take as Defense Minister, or even as Finance Minister, Israel’s relationships with much of the world would deteriorate rapidly, with Arab countries perhaps even breaking newly forged diplomatic relations. State Department spokesman Ned Price said pointedly<sup>14</sup> “We hope that all Israeli government officials will continue to share the values of an open, democratic society,” which allows Netanyahu to tell Smotrich that an Israeli Defense Minister cannot function<sup>15</sup> without American support (a finance minister somewhat less so). Moreover, the United Nations General Assembly has just asked<sup>16</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Danny Zaken, “Netanyahu tells Arab leaders Smotrich won’t be defense minister,” *Globe*, 20 November 2022. <https://en.globes.co.il/en/article-netanyahu-tells-arab-leaders-smotrich-wont-be-defense-minister-1001430370>

<sup>12</sup> Ben Caspit, “US apprehensive Netanyahu will nominate far-right defense minister,” *al-monitor*, 15 November 2022. <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2022/11/us-apprehensive-netanyahu-will-nominate-far-right-defense-minister>

<sup>13</sup> Michael Hauser Tov and Jonathan Lis, “Netanyahu, Ben-Gvir Agree to Legalize West Bank Settlement Evacuated in 2005,” *Haaretz*, 16 November 2022. <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/2022-11-16/ty-article/.premium/netanyahu-ben-gvir-agree-to-legalize-west-bank-settlement-evacuated-in-2005/00000184-8245-dd3b-a5bf-c6453bb90000>

<sup>14</sup> Jacob Magid, “US: We hope all Israeli officials will uphold our shared democratic values,” *The Times of Israel*, 2 November 2022. [https://www.timesofisrael.com/liveblog\\_entry/us-we-hope-all-israeli-officials-will-uphold-our-shared-democratic-values/](https://www.timesofisrael.com/liveblog_entry/us-we-hope-all-israeli-officials-will-uphold-our-shared-democratic-values/)

<sup>15</sup> Ben Caspit, “US apprehensive Netanyahu will nominate far-right defense minister,” *al-monitor*, 15 November 2022. <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2022/11/us-apprehensive-netanyahu-will-nominate-far-right-defense-minister>

<sup>16</sup> Jonathan Shamir, “Israel’s Occupation and the International Court of Justice: What Happens Next?,” *Haaretz*, 15 November 2022. <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/2022-11-15/ty-article/.premium/israels-occupation-and-the-international-court-of-justice-what-happens-next/00000184-7b5c-d6bd-a9fc-7bdf23260000>

the International Court of Justice in the Hague for its opinion on whether Israel's 55-year occupation of the West Bank by now constitutes virtual annexation in defiance of international law, as well as whether Israel is committing the crime of apartheid in its treatment of Palestinians. The U.S. opposed the measure, which was overwhelmingly carried by 98 to 17.

In addition, the West Bank has been seething for months, with almost nightly IDF raids on armed Palestinian militants, and a West Bank death toll not seen since the waning days of the Second intifada in 2005. The head of the Shin Bet security service reportedly has warned<sup>17</sup> the incoming prime minister of the genuine likelihood of a new intifada breaking out imminently. This is compounded by the advanced age of the unpopular Palestinian president Mahmoud Abbas (he just turned 87 on November 15), who is in the 18th year of a 4-year term and has no obvious successor.

There is good reason to believe the Abraham Accords states would react sharply to policies imposed by a new far-right government, even without Smotrich at Defense. Indeed, Emirati Foreign Minister Sheikh Abdullah bin Zayed expressed concerns<sup>18</sup> about it when he visited Israel before the elections. While it can be assumed that no diplomatic action will be taken before the government is formed, which will likely be about Dec. 18, it is very possible that the widespread anger in at least some of the Abraham Accords states may persuade their governments to withdraw their newly appointed ambassadors. It is hard to imagine that any more Arab states, especially the big prize, Saudi Arabia, will “normalize” relations with this government in power. However, Netanyahu has surprised analysts before, but trying to control this upcoming government will likely be the most challenging test of his long political career.

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<sup>17</sup> Toi Staff, “Shin Bet head said to warn Netanyahu PA could collapse, worsening security situation,” *The Times of Israel*, 19 November 2022, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/report-shin-bet-chief-warns-netanyahu-on-dangers-of-pa-collapse-resulting-violence/>

<sup>18</sup> Barak Ravid, “Scoop: Emirati FM tells Netanyahu he is concerned about ultra-right coalition,” *Axios*, 26 October 2022. <https://www.axios.com/2022/10/26/uae-israel-netanyahu-ultra-right-itamar-ben-gvir>