

# THE ABRAHAM ACCORDS - ISRAEL AND THE MIDDLE EAST – WHAT NEXT?

*The signing of the Abraham Accords in September 2020 was a turning point in Israel's standing in the Middle East. The accords created a positive atmosphere that helped promote regional cooperation in security and the economy. This positive change does not, however, provide an answer to some of the fundamental challenges that Israel is facing, which cast their shadows on the entire region, such as the Iranian threat - Tehran's regional ambitions and its efforts to gain nuclear capabilities; but first and foremost, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, which is getting further and further away from a solution, and may flare up and damage regional stability and hinder the progress in Israeli-Arab relations, which was achieved following the signing of the Abraham accords.*

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Fall 2022

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**O**n 15 September 2020, the “Abraham Accords” between Israel and the United Arab Emirates, and Bahrain were signed in a solemn ceremony on the lawns of the White House. A few weeks later, Morocco and Sudan also joined the accords. The accords were reached with the support of the United States, which sought to see them as a cornerstone for its efforts to promote regional cooperation in security and economy and to ensure regional stability.<sup>1</sup>

During the two years that have passed since these accords were signed, they have survived challenges - such as rounds of violence between Israel and Hamas and the Islamic Jihad in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, as well as sharp criticism from Iran and its allies in Lebanon and Palestine. The accords contributed to creating a positive atmosphere between Israel and its Arab neighbors, which helped promote regional cooperation in the fields of security and economy. Türkiye, which reached an understanding with Israel in August 2022 to normalize the relations between the two countries, may also play an essential leading role in this regional cooperation.<sup>2</sup> The positive change in the atmosphere and the promotion of regional cooperation in a variety of fields do not, however, provide an answer to some of the fundamental challenges that Israel is facing, which cast their shadows on the entire region, such as Iran’s ambitions to obtain nuclear capabilities as well as to increase its influence in the Persian Gulf and throughout the Fertile Crescent, starting in Iraq, moving to Syria and Lebanon and ending in faraway Yemen.

Along with this, it is worth noting the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the solution of which is getting further and further away in the face of reluctance on both the Israeli and the Palestinian sides to advance the two-state solution. A flare-up of renewed rounds of violence between Israel and the Palestinians could destabilize the region and erode the achievements of the Abraham Accords and the momentum of regional cooperation gained following their signing in recent years.

### ***Israel And the Changing Faces of Middle East***

The signing of the Abraham Accords with Israel expressed the willingness of the signatory Arab states, led by the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain, to establish peaceful relations with Israel and to promote cooperation with it in the face of

<sup>1</sup> See The White House, “Abraham Accords Peace Agreement,” 15 September 2020. Retrieved from [www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/abraham-accords-peace-agreement-treaty-of-peace-diplomatic-relations-and-full-normalization-between-the-united-arab-emirates-and-the-state-of-israel/](https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/abraham-accords-peace-agreement-treaty-of-peace-diplomatic-relations-and-full-normalization-between-the-united-arab-emirates-and-the-state-of-israel/). See also Michael Crowley, Israel, U.A.E. and Bahrain Sign Accords, “With an Eager Trump Playing Host,” *New York Times*, 15 September 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/09/15/us/politics/trump-israel-peace-emirates-bahrain.html>

<sup>2</sup> Meir Ben-Shabbat, David Aaronson, “The Abraham Accords, Two Years On: Impressive Progress, Multiple Challenges, and Promising Potential,” *INSS Insight*, No. 1632, 15 August 2022. <https://www.inss.org.il/publication/abraham-accords-two-years/>

shared challenges and threats and in recognition of Israel's standing as a regional power with military and economic might, and even political importance – that may contribute to strengthening their security and prosperity.

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All of this is to express the changing faces of the Middle East in recent decades, which are marked by the weakening of the “Arab collective,” and the decline of Arab nationalism - a leading ideology in the fifties and sixties - as a result of the failure of Arab countries to deal with worsening social and economic problems at home.<sup>3</sup> These changes cracked the wall of Arab enmity and hostility towards Israel. They led to the signing of an Israeli-Egyptian peace agreement in March 1979, and later in the nineties to the opening of a peace process between Israel and the Arabs which led to the signing of the Oslo Accords in September 1993 between Israel and the PLO and the signing of a peace agreement between Israel and Jordan in October 1994.<sup>4</sup>

However, Israel was not the only one to benefit from the changes on the map of the Middle East. Alongside her stood two new-old regional players, who sought to fill the void created by the decline of Arabism. One was Türkiye under the leadership of Recep Tayyip Erdogan, who gave his country political stability, the likes of which it had not known for many years and turned it into a regional power of weight. Erdogan focused Türkiye's interest and activity not only in Europe as before, but also in the Arab region, the Muslim world, mainly in Central Asia, and even Africa.<sup>5</sup> Iran also benefited from the changes that took place in the Middle East. It took advantage of them to advance its goals focused on achieving influence and even hegemony in the Persian Gulf and the Fertile Crescent - that region that extends from the Iranian highlands to the shores of the Mediterranean Sea, starting in Iraq, going to Syria and ending in Lebanon, and finally, even in Yemen where it mobilized

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<sup>3</sup> See Fuad Ajami, *The Arab Predicament: Arab Political Thought and Practice Since 1967* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981); Asher Susser, “The decline of the Arabs,” *Middle East Quarterly*, 10(4) (Fall 2003), p. 3-15.

<sup>4</sup> See Kenneth Stein, *Heroic Diplomacy: Sadat, Kissinger, Carter, Begin and the Quest for Arab-Israeli Peace* (New York: Routledge, 1999); Itamar Rabinovich, *Waging Peace: Israel and the Arabs at the End of the Century* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004).

<sup>5</sup> See Sone Gagaptay, *The Rise of Turkey: The Twenty-First Century's First Muslim Power* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2014); *Erdogan's Empire: Turkey and the Politics of the Middle East* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2019).

to help the Houthis (a Zaydi-Shi'ite faction) in the civil war that broke out in the country. Along with this, Iran worked to attain nuclear capabilities that may allow it a free hand in advancing its goals. These ambitions of Iran were perceived as a threat by the Gulf states and pushed them towards Israel.<sup>6</sup>

### *The Arab Spring and its Aftermath – Repercussions for Israel*

In the winter of 2010, protests and revolutions broke out in many of the Arab countries, that led to destabilization and even the collapse of some of the regimes that had ruled them for decades.

In Tunisia and Egypt, Islamic parties - the Nahda movement in Tunisia and the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt - took power into their own hands, after winning in the general elections held in these countries after the collapse of the ruling regimes of Zayn al-Abidin bin Ali and Husni Mubarak. But at the end of the day these two countries returned to the starting point where they were on the eve of the Arab Spring revolutions. In Tunisia, power soon returned to the forces of the old order - the army, the state institutions, and the economic and social elites. In Egypt, the army returned and took power in June 2013 under the leadership of General Abd al-Fattah al-Sisi.<sup>7</sup>

In Libya and Yemen, on the other hand, the protests led to the disintegration and the collapse of these states and the outbreak of bloody civil wars. In Syria, the Arab spring protest turned into a civil war. Still, Syrian President Bashar al-Assad survived the challenge to his regime, thanks to the military involvement of Russia and Iran in fighting beginning in September 2015.<sup>8</sup> Thus, Iran took advantage of the chaos created by the Arab Spring revolutions to establish a hold not only in Syria but also in Yemen, and even in Iraq, which already collapsed following the United States' invasion of the country in the spring of 2003.<sup>9</sup>

Iran's growing regional standing pushed many of the Arab countries, and mainly the Gulf states, into Israel's arms and contributed to the deepening of dialogue and cooperation, aimed at curbing the threatening power of Iran as well as fighting the waves of Salafi-Jihadist terrorism led by the ISIS organization that raised its head in the Arab world.

<sup>6</sup> See Amin Saikal, *Iran Rising: The Survival and Future of the Islamic Republic* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017).

<sup>7</sup> See Marc Lynch (ed.) *The Arab Uprisings Explained, New Contentious Politics in the Middle East* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014).

<sup>8</sup> See William Harris, *Quicksilver War, Syria, Iraq and the Spiral Conflict* (London: Hurst, 2018).

<sup>9</sup> See Jonathan Spyer, "Is it Iran's Middle East now?" *Fathom* (Autumn 2015), <https://fathomjournal.org/is-it-irans-middle-east-now/>

Thus, for example, Israel and Egypt began to cooperate in the fight against the ISIS affiliate Salafi groups in the Sinai Peninsula. Although there has been no change in the attitude of the public in Egypt towards Israel, the Egyptian regime has become more committed to unprecedented cooperation in the military fields with Israel.<sup>10</sup> Israel also tightened security cooperation with Jordan given Jordan's fear that the war in Syria would spill over into its territory. Jordan also became dependent on Israel as a source of energy and water supply. The two countries signed several agreements to supply Israeli gas to Jordan and increase the water quotas that Israel provides to Jordan.<sup>11</sup>

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Cooperation has also tightened between Israel and the Gulf countries, primarily Saudi Arabia. It began at the late 1990s when channels of political dialogue and military cooperation, that included the transfer of intelligence information and purchases of military equipment from Israel, were established between the parties. Still, it gained momentum in the last decade.<sup>12</sup>

In 2019, Saudi Arabia, Egypt and the Gulf countries mobilized to help the American administration promote the “deal of the century”, a peace plan favorable to Israel, to achieve an Israeli-Palestinian peace agreement, and even pressured the Palestinian Authority to accept it.<sup>13</sup> It should be mentioned that President Trump's administration (2016-2020) gave Israel unprecedented support and thus, for example, recognized in December 2017 Jerusalem as the capital of Israel, and in March 2019 the annexation of the Syrian Golan Heights to Israel. Thus, his attempt to promote the “deal of the century” presented in January 2020 was also seen as an expression of American support for Israel.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Al-Jazeera, “Egypt, Israel in close cooperation against Sinai fighters: Sisi,” 5 January 2019, <https://katzz.net/c0644b>

<sup>11</sup> Aaron Magid, “Israel and Jordan's Relationship Is Better Than It Looks,” *Foreign Policy*, 29 July 2021, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/07/29/israel-jordan-palestine-bennett-netanyahu-abdullah-cold-peace/>

<sup>12</sup> Yossi Melman, “Under the radar: The secret contacts between Israel and Saudi Arabia have moved up a notch,” *Forbes*, 17 June 2016, <http://www.forbes.com/news/new.aspx?Pn6VQ=EG&0r9VQ=EJHJL> [in Hebrew].

<sup>13</sup> Mohamed Abdelaziz, “Arab Reactions to Trump's Peace Plan: An Analysis and Recommendation,” The Washington Institute. 31 January 2020. <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/arab-reactions-trumps-peace-plan-analysis-and-recommendation>

<sup>14</sup> Ruth Margalit, “Trump's Legacy in Israel,” *The New Yorker*, 12 January 2021. <https://www.newyorker.com/news/dispatch/donald-trumps-legacy-in-israel>

And finally, on 15 September 2020, the Abraham Accords between Israel, the United Arab Emirates, and Bahrain were signed in Washington. A few weeks later these countries were joined by Morocco and Sudan, who also established diplomatic relations with Israel.

### ***Middle East - Following the Abraham Accords***

The United States played an essential role in promoting the Abraham Accords. Thus, for example, Washington mobilized to support the military regime ruling Sudan and recognized the annexation of Western Sahara to Morocco in return for their readiness to normalize their relations with Israel.<sup>15</sup>

The United States also contributed to the tightening and deepening of security cooperation between Israel and many of the Arab countries, for example, in air defense and early warning from enemy aircrafts. The Americans also initiated joint air and naval exercises in which Israeli forces participated alongside Arab forces. In addition, it was reported in June 2022 about a meeting of Arab chiefs of staff, including the Saudi chief of staff, in Sharm el-Sheikh, which dealt with increasing the ability to provide early warning and air defense against aerial threats, especially missiles and drones, in which the Israeli chief of staff also participated. This meeting was seen in the media reports as part of the American effort to establish Middle Eastern NATO which will assist in maintaining regional stability and in which Israel will also be integrated.<sup>16</sup>

It should be noted that the signatory countries of the Abraham Accords did not limit the cooperation they promoted with Israel only to the security field but worked to promote economic ties and even full normalization with Israel, including mutual visits and the promotion of trade, tourism and cultural and academic dialogue.<sup>17</sup>

This economic cooperation gained momentum following the discovery of gas fields on the shores of the Mediterranean Sea. Israel was the first to discover and exploit gas fields along its shores, which made it an important player in the world energy field. In September 2021, the regional gas forum was founded in Cairo by seven Mediterranean countries: Egypt, Israel, Greece, Cyprus, Jordan, Italy, France, and the Palestinian Authority. In June 2022 Israel signed a memorandum of understanding

<sup>15</sup> See Jason Isaacson, "The Abraham Accords' 'Side Deals'," *Newsweek*, 11 February 2021. <https://www.newsweek.com/we-must-honor-abraham-accords-side-deals-uae-morocco-opinion-1568314>

<sup>16</sup> Michael R. Gordon and David S. Cloud, "U.S. Held Secret Meeting With Israeli, Arab Military Chiefs to Counter Iran Air Threat," *The Wall Street Journal*, 29 June 2022. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/u-s-held-secret-meeting-with-israeli-arab-military-chiefs-to-counter-iran-air-threat-11656235802>

<sup>17</sup> Omar Rahman, "The emergence of GCC-Israel relations in a changing Middle East," *Brookings Institute*, 28 July 2021. <https://www.brookings.edu/research/the-emergence-of-gcc-israel-relations-in-a-changing-middle-east/>

with the European Union according to which gas from Israel will be piped to Egypt where it will be liquefied and exported to Europe.<sup>18</sup>

Israel's efforts to leverage the gas discoveries to advance its relations with Türkiye initially did not go well. Yet, in 2022 the two countries began a dialogue that led to the normalization of their relations and got them back on track. One of the topics on the agenda was the cooperation in the field of gas production and export, including the possibility of exporting gas to Europe through Türkiye.<sup>19</sup>

The strengthening of Israel's regional standing and the improvement in its relations with its Arab neighbors also strengthened its international standing. Indeed, along with tightening ties with the United States under the administration of President Trump, Israel promoted its ties with Russia to establish an intimate dialogue, at least until the Russian invasion of Ukraine in early 2022; and heightened economic cooperation with China and with India. Even its relations with Europe improved, due to Europe's need for new sources of energy as well as the need to purchase weaponry systems such as the Iron Dome and Arrow missiles. Israel also continued to promote relations with countries in the wider circle, including Greece and Cyprus and even Romania and Bulgaria, with whom it held joint military training, as well as with Azerbaijan, Ethiopia, and South Sudan.<sup>20</sup>

### *The Abraham Accords and the Challenges Ahead*

By signing the Abraham Accords, many Arab countries expressed their readiness to advance their relations with Israel regardless of the Palestinian question and the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian conflict. However, this conflict remained a significant challenge to the regional stability and the Arab-Israeli relations, which may impose anew on Israel and the entire region.

Israel seemed to have lost faith in peace negotiations with the Palestinians and thus avoided launching or engaging in such negotiations. However, it is worth mentioning that alongside fatigue and indifference showed by the Israeli public towards a possible Israeli-Palestinian peace process, there was also a change in direction and policy in Israel, as expressed in the efforts made by Benjamin Netanyahu government that

<sup>18</sup> Joe Macaron, "The Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum Reinforces Current Regional Dynamics," *Arab Center Washington DC (ACW)*, 25 January 2019. Retrieved from <https://arabcenterdc.org/resource/the-eastern-mediterranean-gas-forum-reinforces-current-regional-dynamics/>. See also Andrew Parasiliti, Elizabeth Hagedorn, "The Takeaway: Egypt's U.S envoy touts EastMed Gas Forum as regional model," *al-Monitor*, 18 May 2022. <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2022/05/takeaway-egypts-us-envoy-touts-eastmed-gas-forum-regional-model>

<sup>19</sup> Steven A. Cook, "How Israel and Turkey Benefit from Restoring Relations," *Council on Foreign Relations*, 23 August 2022. <https://www.cfr.org/in-brief/how-israel-and-turkey-benefit-restoring-relations>

<sup>20</sup> For more see Yossi Shain, *The Israeli Century, and the Israelization of Judaism* (in Hebrew) (Tel Aviv: Miscal, Yediot Aharonot, 2019).

ruled Israel during the last decade (2009-2021), to preserve Israel's control of the West Bank and to prevent the establishment of a Palestinian state in these territories. And so, in the opinion of many, the vision of the two states went on and died out, considering the reality created on the ground itself - the dramatic increase in the size of the Jewish population in the Israeli settlements in the West bank.

Thus, Israel tried to preserve the existing status quo in the West Bank and ensure relative stability, while avoiding any peace negotiation with the Palestinians. The result was however the breaking out of rounds of violence again and again in the West Bank as well as between Israel and Hamas and the Islamic Jihad in the Gaza Strip.<sup>21</sup>

Iran is also a source of threat for Israel due to the nuclear project it promotes, which Israel sees as a potential existential threat. But the Iranian challenge also has to do with Iran's attempts to establish a hold on the shores of the Mediterranean and to use the outposts it has obtained in Lebanon, Syria and the Gaza Strip to attack Israel. Given these challenges and threats, Israel launched an offensive campaign ("the campaign between the wars"), to delay the Iranian nuclear project and prevent Tehran from establishing a military presence in Syria. This Israeli-Iranian friction may lead to an undesirable open military confrontation between the two countries.<sup>22</sup> It is worth noting that many Arab countries, especially the Gulf states, are willing and even interested in cooperating with Israel in the face of the growing Iranian threats to their stability and security. But at the same time, they prefer to avoid a frontal military confrontation with Iran. Thus, the overlap between the Israeli interests on the Iranian question and that of its Arab partners is not complete.

### ***In Conclusion***

Following the signing of the Abraham Accords in September 2020, the secret dialogue that Israel and its Arab neighbors maintained on security issues turned into an intimate alliance that includes political and economic components.

These accords positively contributed to Israel's relations with the surrounding Arab countries, thus strengthening Israel's regional standing. The normalization of Israel's

<sup>21</sup> Amos Yadlin, Udi Dekel, Kim Lavi, "A Strategic Framework for the Israeli-Palestinian Arena," *The Institute for National Security Studies*, March 2019. <https://www.inss.org.il/publication/strategic-framework-israeli-palestinian-arena/>; Pnina Sharvit Baruch, *Viability of One-State Models*, Memorandum No. 217, December 2021. <https://www.inss.org.il/publication/one-state-models/>

<sup>22</sup> Eran Ortal, "The Fly on the Elephant's Back: The Campaign between Wars in Israel's Security Doctrine," *Strategic Assessment*, Volume 24, No. 2 (April 2021), p. 108-115, <https://strategicassessment.inss.org.il/en/articles/the-fly-on-the-elephants-back-the-campaign-between-wars-in-israels-security-doctrine/>; Louis Imbert, "Israel-Iran: The Shadow War Intensifies," *Le Monde*, 13 June 2022. [https://www.lemonde.fr/en/international/article/2022/06/13/israel-iran-the-shadow-war-intensifies\\_5986617\\_4.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/en/international/article/2022/06/13/israel-iran-the-shadow-war-intensifies_5986617_4.html)

relations with Türkiye is but another layer in this new regional order whose purpose is to confront the security and economic challenges faced by the region's countries. Contrary to the past, the Palestinian issue did not prevent the promotion of relations between Israel and its Arab neighbors. And yet it still casts its shadow over the region. Indeed, while the Arab regimes recognize the importance of their ties with Israel, the Arab street still shows enmity and hostility towards Israel. Thus, in the absence of a visible chance of achieving a solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the Palestinian problem will continue to threaten the regional stability and the building of Israel's relations with its Arab partners.

Even on the Iranian question, there is not necessarily a complete overlap between Israel's goals and those of its Arab partners. The latter want to create an effective deterrence against Iran, but not necessarily to be dragged into a major conflict with it.

The Abraham Accords can therefore be seen as a progress on the way to achieving regional stability and economic prosperity. Still, the challenge for Israel and its Arab partners remains as it was a decade ago - how to promote a close relationship while trying to prevent the outbreak of an all-out Israeli-Iranian conflict and a flare-up in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, and at the same time leaving the door open to the possibility of bringing about a solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in the future that would be acceptable to both sides and on the international community.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> See Imad K, Harb, "The Middle East Accords: An Arab Perspective," *The Arab center, Washington D.C.*, 2 November 2020. <https://arabcenterdc.org/resource/the-middle-east-accords-an-arab-perspective/>