

## АКТУАЛЬНЫЕ ПРОБЛЕМЫ СОВРЕМЕННЫХ МЕЖДУНАРОДНЫХ ОТНОШЕНИЙ

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### Israel in the Middle East: A burgeoning “crescent of stability”

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The 2020 Abraham Accords normalization agreements between Israel, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Morocco and Sudan have ushered in a new era in Israeli-Arab relations, setting in motion novel geopolitical dynamics both within the Middle East and radiating further afield to adjacent regions. This development marks a qualitative shift in the way that Israel’s regional integration is perceived by many within the region, with pragmatic, technology-based collaboration, both bilaterally and multilaterally, replacing the widespread acrimony which prevailed in the past. Irenic diplomacy aside, the agreements have produced tangible results in trade, tourism and collaborative technological projects focused on a host of regional development issues. Given the very strong Israeli-Greek-Cypriot “triangular” partnership, recent diplomatic achievements with Turkey and Azerbaijan and the explicit role played by India in some of the new Israeli-Arab multilateral structures, it is no exaggeration to speak of an emerging “crescent of stability” stretching from the Mediterranean, through the Caucasus, Central Asia and India, enveloping — and in many ways containing — the destabilizing influence of Iran. The research objective of the paper is to reveal Israel’s role in the Middle East region, bringing together the micro and macro levels of analysis and exploring how historical events and current developments contribute to Israel’s regional position.

*Keywords:* Israel, Middle East, Abraham Accords, Israeli-Arab conflict.

Не имей сто рублей, а имей сто друзей.  
(Better one hundred friends, than one  
hundred rubles.)

*Russian proverb*

## Introduction

The signing of the Abraham Accords between Israel, the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain, later joined too by Sudan and Morocco, under the auspices of the United States, has proved to be a watershed event, setting much of the Middle East on a decidedly different trajectory from that which it was on for the last century. Still in its beginnings, a picture is already emerging of a “crescent of stability” which is spreading through the region and beyond, linking up in the east with Central Asia and India.

The immediate and most obvious aspect of this development is the signing of peace agreements between Israel and the Arab state signatories and establishment of bilateral diplomatic relations between the sides. Though never directly engaging in open military hostilities with Israel, for decades these Arab states formed part of a more or less uniform front of Arab hostility towards Israel, blocking its engagement with the broader region and joining hands in striving to ensure its diplomatic isolation. The accords have signaled a sharp departure from this erstwhile posture.

Further, the inauguration of Israeli diplomatic missions in Abu Dhabi, Dubai, Manama and Rabat was swiftly followed by a voluminous repertoire of bilateral agreements in numerous spheres, in many cases budgeted and implemented in concrete follow-up collaborations, reciprocal high-level delegations and significant trade and investment volumes.

These bilateral developments have been coupled with the launch of multilateral structures, including the I2U2 initiative which brings together Israel, the UAE, the US and India and the Negev Forum, bringing together Israel, the US, the UAE, Bahrain, Morocco and Egypt in the advancement of regional development goals.

In tandem with these Israeli-Arab developments, a rapprochement between Israel and Turkey which saw the 2022 return of respective ambassadors and flowering of trade and intelligence cooperation, a further deepening of the strategic partnership between Israel and (Shi'ite majority) Azerbaijan with the announcement in November 2022 of an impending opening of an Azerbaijani Embassy in Israel, as well as progressively deepening ties with Central Asian countries, together reflect a consolidation of Israel's diplomatic engagement throughout the broader region.

Equally important is the pragmatic spirit which runs through the various Abraham Accords agreements and the rhetoric surrounding them. Absent from the discourse between Israel and its new partners are the heated diatribes and impassioned invectives against Israel which had become a staple of rhetoric emanating from the Arab states in the past, whether in the context of Arab League summits or United Nations debates (and which still persist in some quarters in the Arab world still outside the circle of peace-making states).

This is significant due to its secondary impact on public opinion in these states, if only partial and subtle in the present. If in the past, Israel could look concernedly at the fragility of its peace accords with Egypt and Jordan, and their dependence on a relatively

thin stratum of governmental interlocutors, focused primarily on the defense establishments, with no significant signs of penetrating deeper into social echelons to serve as a foundation for durable peace, the situation with the Abraham Accords states is emphatically different. In the brief period since the signing of these accords, countless expressions of people-to-people, cultural, touristic and of course commercial engagement have added an unprecedented dimension of depth to the rapprochement between the sides, scarcely distinguishable, and in some senses even surpassing, what is commonplace among states elsewhere in the world that have never been in dispute.

These developments signify the depth of change which is transpiring with regard to Israel's role in the region. This paper puts these trends in historical context, fleshes out some of their key elements and offers a perspective on likely trajectories going forward. Accordingly, the research objective of the paper is to reveal Israel's role in the Middle East region, bringing together the micro and macro levels of analysis and exploring how historical events and current developments contribute to Israel's regional position. The paper addresses opinions of experts and the government of Israel and offers evaluations that seek to reconcile different interpretations of regional politics.

The methods for the paper embrace historical and comparative analysis, and the conclusions are drawn on the basis of interpretation of primary sources including governmental documents.

The paper is comprised of two sections. The first section reviews Israel's regional engagement prior to the 2020s, and the second section addresses shifts in this engagement, stimulated by the Abraham Accords.

## **Israel in the Middle East: Pre-2020**

The Abraham Accords were not, of course, the first peace agreements to be signed between Israel and Arab partners. Egypt (1979), Jordan (1994) and the Palestinian Authority (1990s) all signed peace accords with Israel, which are still in force [1; 2]. Other Arab League countries (Qatar, Oman, Bahrain, Tunisia, Morocco, and Mauritania) had established a modicum of relations with Israel following the Oslo Accords in the 1990s only to sever them several years later. Moreover, it would be an error to underestimate the historical significance of the precedent set by the Camp David Accords with Egypt, both as a practical precursor to the agreements which followed, and as a psychological traversal of the proverbial "Rubicon".

Nevertheless, not for naught were the relations spawned by these earlier accords deemed as constituting what some came to refer to as "cold" peace. Diplomatic and intergovernmental relations between Israel and Egypt withstood major geostrategic crises, including the first (1982) and second (2006) wars between Israel and Lebanon, the first (1988) and second (2000) Intifadas and even the rise to power of the Muslim Brotherhood under then Egyptian president Mohammad Mursi in 2012. Yet, commerce, tourism, cultural and inter-personal relations never materialized to any significant degree and were expressly discouraged by the Egyptian side. Moreover, expressions of virulent anti-Semitism continued to abound in the Egyptian press over the years and Egypt played a prominent role in campaigning against Israel in UN and other international fora.

The situation with Jordan was similar. The initial period after the signing of the peace agreement in 1994 was marked by considerable personal warmth between Jordan's King

Hussein and Israeli Prime Minister Rabin, which may have seemed at the time a harbinger of a new, warmer, tone of relations. However, in time, numerous points of disagreement clouded over this initial measure of optimism, whether concerning the Temple Mount in Jerusalem or, as in the case of Egypt, Jordan often playing a negative role in seeking to denigrate Israel in the multilateral arena. As in Egypt, there were many expressions of hostility towards Israel in Jordanian public discourse over the years and very little in the way of commercial, cultural or otherwise non-governmental exchange between the countries. There is no doubting that peace between Jordan and Israel was of tremendous importance, exemplified, as it was, in cooperation with regard to water resources, security and maintenance of stability. But warm it wasn't.

The Oslo Accords, which led to the establishment of the Palestinian Authority and subsequently regulated Israel's relations with it, too began under an aura of measured optimism, following a series of Israeli territorial withdrawals from parts of the Gaza Strip and Judea and Samaria. However, these accords, which consisted of a series of agreements, ran aground against a persistent background of terrorist attacks against Israelis, culminating in the launch by the Palestinians in 2000 of an unprecedented wave of suicide bombings and other terror attacks, which came to be known as the "Second Intifada"<sup>1</sup>.

Tellingly, the latter campaign was launched immediately following a sweeping peace proposal by then Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak at Camp David under US auspices. Many within Israel interpreted the Palestinian violence launched pursuant to this peace proposal as a clear sign that the Palestinian leadership had not come to terms with the requirements of a viable peace settlement. Moreover, Palestinian elites have eschewed engaging with Israel diplomatically on realistic contours of a resolution to the conflict, preferring attempts to internationalize the conflict via various United Nations organs, the International Criminal Court and most recently, in December 2022, the International Court of Justice.

## **The Abraham Accords: A paradigm shift**

### *The Abraham Accords countries*

The Abraham Accords, ratified in Washington, D. C. under US auspices on September 15, 2020, saw the recognition of Israel's sovereignty by the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain and opened a path for establishment of full diplomatic relations between these two Arab countries and Israel. In October 2020, it was announced that Sudan was joining the normalization process with Israel. Then, in December 2020, Morocco joined the accords and (re)-normalized relations with Israel<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Whereas some initial accounts pointed to Ariel Sharon's visit to the Temple Mount in Jerusalem in September 2000 as sparking the uprising, ample evidence has since accumulated demonstrating that it was a premeditated campaign launched at the behest of Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat, most likely in an attempt to secure concessions beyond those tabled at Camp David. Such evidence includes subsequent testimony from both Hamas, Fatah and other Palestinian officials and even Arafat's wife Suha. See, for example: remarks of Hamas leader Mahmoud A-Zahar in a 2010 lecture at the Islamic University in Gaza [3]; remarks of Mamduh Nofal, former commander of the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP) [4]; and a reference to Suha Arafat's widely reported interview to Dubai TV [5].

<sup>2</sup> Morocco had already established low-level diplomatic relations with Israel in 1994 pursuant to the Oslo Accords, only to sever these in 2000 after the launch of the Second Intifada [6].

From the outset, the tenor of the accords and their accompanying rhetoric struck a more ambitious tone than had been common in previous peacemaking efforts, expressly referring to multiple civilian domains of cooperation and the regional dimensions they were to embody. This was evident in the inaugural declaration's "vision of peace, security, and prosperity in the Middle East and around the world" and in its unqualified approbation of the establishment of "diplomatic relations between Israel and its neighbors in the region"<sup>3</sup>.

The momentum of Israeli-Emirati peacemaking which followed the initial declaration was then extremely rapid. On January 24, 2021, Israel opened its embassy in Abu Dhabi, followed by the opening of the UAE embassy in Tel Aviv in May 2021 and the inauguration of Israel's consulate general in Dubai on June 30, 2021.

In the space of two years, the two countries put in place an array of tangible agreements that most countries take many years, if ever, to draft and sign. Among these are agreements on investments, financial services, science and technology, food and water security, agriculture, health and vaccinations, environment, space, aviation, energy, tourism, shipping, and many others. In May 2022, a bilateral Free Trade Agreement was signed which is set to come into force in 2023. Even in its absence, the trade volume between the two countries topped \$ 2 billion in 2022. The UAE is currently ranked 17<sup>th</sup> out of Israel's 126 trade partners. A \$ 100 million R & D and investment fund equally funded by the sides was established and is scheduled to commence activity in the near future and is to operate for a decade. Hundreds of thousands of Israeli tourists have visited the UAE since the accords were signed. The remarkable warmth and hospitality with which they have been received are such that Dubai and Abu Dhabi are among the most popular destinations for Israeli tourists. Perhaps most tellingly, reflections of people-to-people relations abound, including reciprocal visits of students and young professionals, academic exchanges and programs of cultural exchange.

Progress with Bahrain too has been swift and comprehensive. Bahrain opened its embassy in Tel Aviv in March 2021, followed by the official inauguration of the Israeli embassy in Manama in September 2021<sup>4</sup>. Notably, Bahrain's foreign minister, Khaled bin Ahmed, has been outspoken about the historical connection between Israel and the region, transcending the more common language among Arab interlocutors of conciliation driven by a grudging pragmatism. At the Manama Conference held in July 2019, a year before the Abraham Accords, bin Ahmed told Israeli television: "Israel is part of this heritage of this whole region, historically, so the Jewish people have a place amongst us" [8]. Such rare expressions of deep-seated recognition from an Arab leader strike a resonant chord with the Israeli public and go some way towards explaining why the Abraham Accords are perceived in Israel as far "warmer" than earlier peacemaking achievements. Though a smaller economy than the UAE, nevertheless Bahrain and Israel have signed a plethora of agreements, including a security cooperation agreement signed during a visit of Israel's defense minister Benny Gantz to Manama in February 2022 [9] and agricultural and food cooperation agreements in October 2022 [10].

Following the initial Abraham Accords signing, Sudan was quick to follow. On October 23, 2020, US President Donald Trump, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Sudanese Chairman of the Sovereignty Council Abdel Fattah al-Burhan issued a Joint

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<sup>3</sup> The text of the declaration is available on the website of the US Department of State [7].

<sup>4</sup> Unofficial ties between the countries go back many years.

Statement announcing that Israel and Sudan had reached a normalization agreement and had ended the formal state of belligerence between them, following the US decision to remove Sudan from the US Sponsors of Terrorism List. As the Joint Statement noted, the US and Israel expressed their commitment “to support the people of Sudan in strengthening their democracy, improving food security, countering terrorism and extremism, and tapping into their economic potential,” with a prominent focus on promoting agricultural projects, a key area of Israeli expertise [11]. This was followed up on April 6, 2021 with the annulment by the Sudanese cabinet of a law forbidding diplomatic and business relations with Israel.

The rapprochement with Sudan has both symbolic and tangible significance. Sudanese capital Khartoum had gained notoriety in 1967 as the seat of the Arab League Summit in which the infamous “3 No’s” were declared by a united Arab world, following the 1967 (“Six Day”) war with Israel: “no peace with Israel, no recognition of Israel, no negotiations with it”<sup>5</sup>. The historical significance of achieving normalization specifically with Khartoum was thus clear, as a statement of the dramatic change that had taken place. From a practical perspective, in previous years Sudan had served repeatedly as a path for smuggling Iranian weapons to Hamas in Gaza. Bringing it into the fold of the Abraham Accords was an important achievement in Israeli and US efforts to curb Iran’s regional influence<sup>6</sup>.

On December 22, 2020, Morocco, Israel and the United States issued a Joint Declaration announcing normalization between the sides and resumption of diplomatic ties (which had been severed by Morocco in 2000 in the wake of the Second Intifada) [14]. The Declaration referenced the US recognition of Moroccan sovereignty over Western Sahara, highlighting the key role played by the US in mediating the breakthrough. On February 9, 2021, Morocco’s newly appointed envoy to Israel commenced operations in Morocco’s liaison office to Israel. Subsequently, on August 12, 2021 Israel inaugurated a liaison office in Rabat, which was later upgraded to embassy status in October 2021. Airlines from both countries began routine direct flights in 2021. The sides have signed an array of bilateral agreements, including agreements on political consultations, aviation and culture. Most notably, the two countries signed the first ever defense memorandum of its kind between Israel and an Arab state during an unprecedented visit of Israel’s defense minister to Rabat on November 24, 2021 [15]. Beyond its tangible aspects, the symbolic import of this last development can scarcely be exaggerated.

Normalization with Morocco has reverberated particularly strongly within Israel due to the country’s large community of Moroccan descent. Israel’s last census (2008) reported close to half a million Israelis of Moroccan descent, while the World Federation of Moroccan Jewry estimates the number at roughly one million, amounting to over ten percent of the country’s population [16]. The Jewish community of Morocco has a venerable history, known for having enjoyed positive relations with the Arab majority and the ruling monarchy. Even prior to the normalization agreement, Israeli tourists favored Morocco as a destination. With the launch of direct flights, tourism between the countries has quite literally “taken off”.

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<sup>5</sup> See Article 3 of the September 1, 1967 “Khartoum Resolution” [12].

<sup>6</sup> Neither of these points was lost on Netanyahu, who referred to them both in his response to the Joint Declaration [13].



## *Positive influence on relations with Egypt and Jordan*

The rapidity, scope and warmth with which ties have been forged between Israel and the Abraham Accords countries have reflected positively on Israel's bilateral relations with Egypt and Jordan, its earlier — previously far more demure — peace partners. Whether through some manner of “diffusion” effect or due to increased diplomatic maneuvering room attendant to the broadening of the coalition of Arab countries engaged openly with Israel, both Egypt and Jordan have gone beyond the calibrated steps they traditionally had taken prior to the Accords.

Pursuant to the Accords, a flurry of high level visits between Israeli and Egyptian officials signaled a departure from the more contained nature of prior relations. Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennet met Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi in Sharm el-Sheikh in September 2021, the first such visit in over a decade. This was later followed by a tripartite meeting in Egypt in March 2022 between Bennet, al-Sisi and Abu Dhabi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed. In March 2022, Israel's Minister of Economy and Industry met with her Egyptian counterpart in Cairo where they issued statements as to their joint efforts to expand economic cooperation and trade, noting a specific goal of doubling bilateral trade to \$ 700 million within three years, following the existing 63 % increase in trade since the signing of the Abraham Accords. The positive atmosphere engendered by the Accords is also influencing the operation of the “Qualified Industrial Zone” (QIZ), which was established in 1996. Exports through the QIZ, which enables jointly manufactured Egyptian-Israeli products to be exported duty-free to the US, hit an all-time high of \$ 1.2 billion in 2021 with Egypt looking to increase export volume through QIZ to \$ 5 billion in the coming years.

Energy-related cooperation has also seen a surge since the Accords. In February 2022, a 50 % increase in gas supply from Israel to Egypt was announced, amounting to an additional 2–2.5 bcm per year scheduled to flow through the Arab Gas Pipeline [17]. Moreover, reflecting the potential to harness newfound regional synergies towards collaboration with key stakeholders outside the Middle East, Israel, Egypt and the EU signed an agreement in June 2022 to sell gas to the European market from Israeli gas-fields in the eastern Mediterranean via Egypt's LNG facilities. In some sense, this latest development compliments the strategic “triangular” partnership which has developed in recent years in the eastern Mediterranean between Israel, Greece and Cyprus, on energy, security and a broad range of other issues<sup>7</sup>.

With a candor that would have been unimaginable in the past, one comes across expressions of pragmatism regarding cooperation with Israel from Egyptian figures calling to “take away all of this clutter” and “really move all of these things [regional issues] aside” in moving forward, reflecting the fact that “Egypt and Israel seek to deliver a message through this cooperation that their relations are solid and are expanding”<sup>8</sup>.

Tangible cooperation between Israel and Jordan has similarly surged in the wake of the Accords. At the Dubai Expo in November 2021, Israel and Jordan signed their largest ever MOU on an energy-water collaborative project in conjunction with the UAE. The project provides for a UAE-built solar power plant to be built in Jordan which is to supply Israel with 600 MW of green power (“Prosperity Green”), in exchange for a desalination

<sup>7</sup> On the ever-tightening Israeli-Greek-Cypriot cooperation, see [18].

<sup>8</sup> Interview of Cairo University political scientist Tarek Fahmi to al-Monitor [19].

plant in Israel which is to provide Jordan with 200 million cubic meters of desalinated water (“Prosperity Blue”). Following initially positive feasibility study results, the three countries signed a renewed MOU in November 2022 at the COP27 climate conference held in Egypt [20].

It is difficult to think of a project which better captures the pragmatic and constructive spirit permeating post-Abraham Accords regional diplomacy than the latter. Before the accords, such a project would have been sheer fantasy. In the reality generated by the accords, it is just one of many initiatives that holds promise of moving the region into an entirely new phase of mutually beneficial collaboration.

## *I2U2*

What began as a virtual meeting between the foreign ministers of the United States, India, Israel and the UAE in October 2021 became formalized as the “I2U2 Group” with the four countries’ first leaders’ summit held during US President Biden’s visit to Jerusalem in July 2022 (with virtual participation of the leaders of India and the UAE). As noted in the Joint Statement released following the summit, explicitly citing the Abraham Accords, the four countries pledged to “harness the vibrancy of our societies and entrepreneurial spirit to tackle some of the greatest challenges confronting our world, with a particular focus on joint investments and new initiatives in water, energy, transportation, space, health, and food security” [21].

Billed by some as a new “Quad”<sup>9</sup> and as an expression of an “Indo-Abrahamic” alliance<sup>10</sup>, the new geopolitical structure serves as a means of harnessing the nascent cooperation between Israel and the UAE as a vehicle for spawning broader regional collaboration, specifically with American and Indian involvement, and relying primarily on private-sector stakeholders and economically viable development activity.

Following the July 2022 leaders’ summit, two main projects were announced: a \$ 330 million hybrid renewable energy project in Gujarat India in which 300 megawatts of solar and wind energy are to be coupled with an energy storage system [24]. A US company is working closely with Indian counterparts with regards to feasibility, financial, technological and regulatory aspects of the project which holds opportunities for participation of Israeli and Emirati firms. The second project involves a \$ 2 billion Emirati investment in an “India — UAE Food Corridor”, backed by Israeli and US technologies, specifically in the agro-industrial sector. The latter project naturally complements a pre-existing US — UAE project titled “Agriculture Innovation Mission for Climate” (AIM4C), and Israel’s existing network of 29 agricultural “Centers of Excellence” throughout India, currently on track for expansion to 45.

At the core of I2U2 is a pragmatic focus on making optimal use of each of the signatories’ comparative advantages, channeling these into strategic development projects throughout the broader region. Were it not a framework involving Israel and Arab partner states, such a perspective would be unremarkable. Indeed, just such synergetic relationships are commonplace in the field of international development throughout the globe.

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<sup>9</sup> The “Quad” refers to the “Indo-Pacific Quadrilateral Dialogue” between the United States, Japan, India and Australia, originating in 2007 and focused on the concept of a “Free and Open Indo-Pacific” [22].

<sup>10</sup> For the “Indo-Abrahamic” perspective, which laid some of the conceptual groundwork for the initiative, see [23].



Yet, in the current context, it is precisely their pedestrian nature which makes these projects stand out, as they would have been unthinkable prior to the Abraham Accords.

Some have called to expand I2U2 to encompass additional partner countries, such as Egypt, Saudi Arabia, France and Greece. Insofar as the constructive dialogue and tangible results that have thus far emanated from the initiative are indicative, at least some of these ambitions might well materialize.

### *The Negev Forum*

Pursuant to the inaugural “Negev Summit” held in Sde Boker Israel on March 27–28, 2022 between the foreign ministers of the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Morocco, Egypt, the United States and Israel, the participating states decided to establish six working groups on security-related and economic and development topics: water and food security; education and tolerance; regional security; energy; tourism; and health. It was further decided to institutionalize the new formation as the “Negev Forum”, with the express goal of bringing “security, prosperity and stability” to the Middle East and to hold regular meetings of a steering committee and an annual high-level meeting at the ministerial level<sup>11</sup>.

Consequently, a follow-up meeting of the Negev Summit Steering Committee was held in Bahrain on June 27, 2022, later followed by the adoption on November 10, 2022 of “The Negev Forum Regional Cooperation Framework”, which explicitly codifies the structures and goals of the Forum [26]. Detailing the various different domains of activity of the six working groups, the underlying theme threading through the initiative is to harness the good-will of the signatories to foster cooperation in all possible fields, with an emphasis on people-to-people relations. Needless to say, these were unprecedented ideas in the Israeli-Arab context.

The Negev Forum Steering Committee met yet again in Abu Dhabi on January 9, 2023, accompanied by 150 participants from the different countries, who serve as members of the various different working groups. In addition to preparing the forum’s foreign ministers’ summit, scheduled to be held in Morocco sometime in mid-2023, the working groups reported on progress to the Steering Committee with regards to a host of tangible projects in various stages of conceptualization and planning [27]. Procedures for adding additional Middle Eastern states as members and for countries outside the region as observers were discussed.

The Negev Forum is a direct offshoot of the Abraham Accords. Alongside the joint interest of the parties to coordinate regional cooperation against the array of military threats posed to the region by Iran, the impetus for forming the Forum has been the recognized potential for harnessing multilateral collaboration to address a host of regional development issues, with the goal of spawning tangible cooperative activity<sup>12</sup>. The speed and intensity with which the forum has materialized and begun its work augurs well for

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<sup>11</sup> In a symbolic turn of events, during the summit, a terror attack that was carried out in the Israeli town of Hadera taking the lives of two Israelis, was unanimously condemned by the participating Arab foreign ministers, a non-trivial development when taken in historical context [25].

<sup>12</sup> There is a voluminous literature documenting Iran’s efforts to export the Islamic revolution throughout the Middle East, relying primarily on “political, economic and social subversion; illicit finance, weapons and narcotics trafficking; and nuclear procurement and proliferation” [28].

its ability to serve as a foundation for a much deeper and broader regional cooperative architecture.

### *The broader region*

The positive regional dynamics spawned by the Abraham Accords have radiated to some extent outwards to the broader region, where we can see signs of deepening cooperation between Israel and key countries. This is particularly evident with regard to Turkey and Azerbaijan. Bilateral relations between Israel and Turkey have gone through successive phases. From a very deep strategic partnership dating back to the 1990s, encompassing security and intelligence cooperation, expansive trade and tourism, relations took a downturn following a highly publicized public confrontation in 2009 at Davos between Turkish Prime Minister Erdogan and then President of Israel Shimon Peres, and a clash between IDF troops and Turkish militants in what came to be known as the “Marmara” flotilla incident in May 2010 [29]. Turkey withdrew its ambassador from Israel in September 2011 and announced a suspension of defense ties. Diplomatic relations were restored in 2016, only to have Turkey once again recall its ambassador in 2018 following clashes between Israel and Gaza-based Hamas. Nevertheless, in the most significant “thaw” in relations in over a decade, and in tandem with ever-improving ties between Israel and the Abraham Accords states, the two countries restored full diplomatic relations in November 2022 and exchanged ambassadors [26]. Just several months prior, in June 2022, Israel’s intelligence agency Mossad and its Turkish counterpart worked together to thwart a slew of planned Iranian terror attacks against Israelis visiting Istanbul, in what became a widely publicized reflection of renewed security cooperation between the two countries [30].

Israel’s relations with Azerbaijan, already very close for many years, nevertheless also received a recent boost, with Azerbaijan’s decision in November 2022 to open an embassy in Israel, with particular attention paid to the fact that it was thus becoming the first country with a Shi’ite majority and government to do so [31]. Though the strategic cooperation between the two countries precedes the Abraham Accords, and the embassy decision was no doubt influenced by other factors as well, the latter cannot be completely divorced from the new regional *zeitgeist*, and the diplomatic maneuvering room it affords for bold new initiatives.

Moreover, the region stretching from Anatolia, through the Caucasus, and eastward across the Caspian Sea to the Central Asian republics of Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Turkmenistan, has historical and ethno-linguistic linkages which gained expression in the multilateral structure of the “Turkic Council”, founded in 2009 with the goal of promoting cooperation between Turkic-speaking states. This structure obtained new impetus in November 2021 with its renaming as the “Organization of Turkic States” and has gained increasing prominence and attention, as a regional multilateral structure aiming to promote cross-border collaboration between its member states [32]. Through its resident embassies in Astana, Tashkent and Ashgabat, Israel has been consistently deepening its relations with all of these countries.

Finally, though it exceeds the purview of this paper, much has been written about the increasingly close ties between Israel and India in recent years, in a plethora of fields including defense, agriculture, trade, culture and many others<sup>13</sup>. As noted, the I2U2 forma-

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<sup>13</sup> For an overview see [33].

tion has institutionalized the natural synergies between this robust bilateral relationship and both Israel and India's complementary interests vis à vis the Middle East.

When viewed in this context, against a backdrop of Israel's deepening ties with other key states and geopolitical formations throughout the broader region, it is no exaggeration to think of the linkages fostered within the context of the Abraham Accords as forming a "crescent of stability" stretching from the Eastern Mediterranean, through the Caucasus and across to Central Asia and India.

### *The Palestinian issue*

The extant territorial contours between Israel and Palestinian-held areas are the result of the series of Israeli territorial withdrawals carried out under the Oslo Accords since the mid-1990s, and the complete Israeli withdrawal ("Disengagement") from the Gaza Strip in 2005. As a consequence of these withdrawals, and subsequent developments, the Palestinian Authority led by Mahmoud Abbas controls Areas A and B within Judea and Samaria (amounting to roughly 40 % of the area)<sup>14</sup> and Hamas controls the Gaza Strip in its entirety, after forcibly seizing control from the Palestinian Authority in 2007 [35]. Security cooperation between Israel and the Palestinian Authority, originally stipulated by the Oslo Accords, has developed positively over time and continues in the present.

Israeli-Palestinian negotiations were last held in 2014 under US auspices, mediated by then Secretary of State John Kerry. These negotiations ran aground with the sides failing to meet the defined deadline for a broad agreement outline [36]. The political bifurcation between Palestinian Authority control within Judea and Samaria and Hamas-led Gaza has posed a significant obstacle to making headway. Moreover, terrorist acts against Israelis have been a constant background feature of the landscape over the years, periodically flaring up into large-scale missile attacks from Gaza into Israel, which have led to a series of significant clashes with the IDF in 2008, 2012, 2014, 2021 and 2022.

In tandem with phases of negotiations, the Palestinian Authority, and the PLO before it, have long pursued a campaign of "internationalizing" the conflict, marshalling sympathy for their cause in the multilateral arena, primarily within the United Nations system, to try and isolate Israel and achieve diplomatic gains. Most recently, in December 2022, this campaign focused on passing a UN General Assembly resolution requesting an advisory opinion from the International Court of Justice regarding "legal consequences" of Israel's presence in Judea and Samaria<sup>15</sup>.

This internationalization strategy has played a role in hardening Israeli attitudes, while at the same time contributing to disaffection within Palestinian society from the Palestinian leadership, given its resounding failure to deliver tangible results [38].

In the past, a main component of the Palestinian emphasis on an internationalizing stance has been the traditionally monolithic political support given to the Palestinian cause from the Arab states. In this regard, it must be recalled that the PLO itself was estab-

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<sup>14</sup> Under the Oslo Accords, the Palestinian Authority obtained various degrees of governing control over urban and populated semi-rural areas of Judea and Samaria, respectively designated as Areas A and B. The remainder of the area, designated Area C, amounting to roughly 60 % of the land, has remained by the agreements under Israeli control [34].

<sup>15</sup> This resolution, passed on December 30, 2022, was rejected by Israel, which has affirmed, perhaps unsurprisingly, that it isn't bound by it [37].

lished in 1964 by the Arab League, under the tutelage of then Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser. Both psychologically, and practically, this traditional closing of ranks within the Arab world behind the Palestinian cause has had a mixed effect. On the one hand, it has been a source of financial aid and political support in the UN and in general. On the other hand, given the ultimate ineffectuality of multilateral efforts to effect a change on the ground, it has in many ways created a sense of overconfidence among the Palestinian elite, perhaps providing at times psychological gratification, but inevitably producing unrealistic expectations regarding what can actually be achieved vis à vis Israel.

It is precisely in this respect that the Abraham Accords hold the potential to mark a sharp departure from this diplomatic dead-end. A key lever of bargaining clout which traditionally served the Palestinian leadership was their ability to hinge normalization between Israel and the Arab world on obtaining their demands from Israel. Thus, the loss of an automatic bulwark of Arab diplomatic support, and the newfound inability to hobble broader Israeli-Arab cooperation, weakens the Palestinian negotiating posture and could induce an ultimate modification in Palestinian attitudes<sup>16</sup>. This, in turn, could potentially pave the way in the future for a resumption of diplomacy within a more realistic frame of reference, perhaps with the emergence of a new generation of Palestinian leaders. It remains to be seen whether this speculative prognosis is borne out, or proves to be overly sanguine<sup>17</sup>.

## Conclusion

Observers of the vicissitudes of the Israeli-Arab conflict over time cannot but appreciate the sea-change which was ushered in by the Abraham Accords. These accords were not just another milestone in a seemingly interminable quagmire. They signify a qualitative change which in many ways transforms the nature of Israel's relations with the Arab world and portends a different — unarguably better — trajectory for the peace and stability of the region and its potential to develop into a hub of technological and commercial cooperation. Moreover, they have served as a catalyst to further deepen Israel's cooperation with the non-Arab powers in the greater region, in particular Turkey, Azerbaijan and additional Central Asian powers. Taking into account the very strong Israeli-Greek-Cypriot “strategic triangle” in the eastern Mediterranean, coupled with the intimate relations and strong defense and commercial cooperation that has emerged between Israel and India in recent years, one quickly sees a picture in which a “crescent of stability” stretches eastward, enveloping, and in many ways containing, the malign influence of Iran.

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<sup>16</sup> This logic can be understood as a feature of formal bargaining models such as appear in game theory. For example, in the Nash Bargaining Solution, a player's share in the outcome is affected by changes in the players' respective reservation levels (the points of a player's indifference between a given outcome and non-agreement). If the status-quo (non-agreement) situation is positively modified for one's rival, this is tantamount to adjusting this rival's reservation level. This rival, in turn, feels less pressure to reach agreement and can thus get more in the bargaining outcome. For a presentation of the Nash Bargaining Solution see [39].

<sup>17</sup> It should be noted in this regard that the “Negev Forum Regional Cooperation Framework” [26] explicitly refers to the Palestinian issue as a matter which can benefit from the rapidly expanding bilateral and multilateral channels of regional cooperation. It includes the following passage: “The Participants also affirmed that these relations can be harnessed to create momentum in Israeli-Palestinian relations, towards a negotiated resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and as part of efforts to achieve a just, lasting and comprehensive peace.”

Contrary to what countless pundits argued over decades of conflict, the Palestinian issue has proved not to be the insurmountable obstacle to a broader peace which it was so often argued to be. Whatever the contours of an ultimate Israeli-Palestinian settlement, the latter will likely be the result of comprehensive peace *between* Israel and the Arab states, not its precursor. The Abraham Accords, and the fountain of commercial, scientific and technological collaboration which continues to spring forth from them, serve as a resounding confirmation of this basic idea.

Good ideas are not hard to sell. Which is why Israel can most likely look ahead confidently at the expansive, yet to be fully realized, potential to broaden its diplomatic relations in the Arab and Muslim world, perhaps to other Gulf states and most significantly to Saudi Arabia. This expansion holds the potential to contribute much to peace and stability in the region, by curbing the destabilizing influence of Iran and spawning scientific, technological and commercial cooperation on an unprecedented scale. This is good news for Israel and for the Arab world, including the Palestinians. It is good news for the people of Iran in their struggle against repression. And it is similarly good news for the broader Eurasian region and any actors in the international arena that have a vested interest in it.

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