



The Geopolitics of the Abraham Accords: A Critical View on Militarization

Tariq Dana

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The Abraham Accords, which formalized the alignment between Israel and some Arab countries, have had far-reaching implications for the geopolitical and security landscape of the Arab World and the broader Middle East. The United States (US) orchestrated the agreement, which was signed by Israel, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and Bahrain in 2020, with Morocco and Sudan following suit. While regarded in mainstream circles as a milestone in Arab-Israeli relations and a beacon of hope for peace, stability, and prosperity, the accords' true intentions are not as peaceful as they appear. As noted by one observer, the Accords amount to an arms deal.¹ In fact, the Accords do not resolve regional conflicts, nor do they intend to do so. Instead, they allowed Israel to expand its sphere of influence and leverage its military superiority. In return, Arab countries have sought to gain access to Israeli military technology and expertise, which have been developed over decades of violent colonial endeavors in Palestine. This has further fueled the militarization and securitization of the region, thereby increasing the likelihood of regional conflict and instability.

The Accords represent a convergence of interests between Israel and Arab autocracies, which have previously engaged in discreet cooperation within the “counterrevolutionary bloc”.² This cooperation, while historically clandestine, became increasingly overt after the Arab uprisings in 2010 threatened the stability of their respective regimes. Consequently, the counterrevolution bloc has actively undermined the Arab uprisings, thwarting any potential for meaningful sociopolitical transformation. This has included support for the military coup in Egypt and fomenting proxy wars in Yemen, Syria, and Libya.

Contrary to claims of promoting regional peace and prosperity, the Abraham Accords have instead demonstrated discernible consequences of destabilization, exacerbated tensions, and conflicts within the region.

Overall, the Arab signatories of the Accords have made a deliberate choice to exclude the issue of Palestine from their regional agenda, which represents a departure from the traditional Arab position as expressed in the Saudi-led Arab peace initiative of 2002. The immediate implication of the deal on the Palestinians is that it reduced the pressure on Israel to end its illegal settlement expansion and the colonization of Palestinian land. It also offered the far-right Israeli government an additional source of power and intensified settlers' terrorism against the Palestinians in the Occupied Palestinian Territories.³

1 Jeffrey Goldberg, “Iran and the Palestinians Lose Out in the Abraham Accords,” *The Atlantic*, 16/9/2020. accessed on 13/2/2023, at: <https://rb.gy/lwnkyf>

2 Jonathan Hoffman, “Israel and the Counterrevolutionaries: Gauging Tel Aviv’s Evolving Regional Alliances After the Arab Uprisings,” *Durham Middle East Articles*, no.102 (2020).

3 “Discord Around the Abraham Accords: Three questions to Dr. Alaa Tartir,” *Institut Montaigne*, 14/10/2020. <https://rb.gy/tjcs3r>



In North Africa, the US recognition of Morocco's sovereignty claim over Western Sahara, in exchange for normalizing relations with Israel, contravenes international law and undermines United Nation initiatives for peaceful conflict resolution between Morocco and Algeria. Additionally, the establishment of a military partnership between Morocco and Israel has intensified tensions and triggered an arms race between the two neighboring countries, raising concerns about the possibility of future military confrontation.

Moreover, the often-cited "shared threat" that brought Israel and some Arab countries together against Iran is much more complex than it may initially appear, as it involves different interests and risks for each country. Israel perceives Iran's ideological and strategic agenda, including its support for the Axis of Resistance, Palestinian armed groups, and Hezbollah, as an existential threat. However, this perception alone does not fully explain the motivations of the other Arab countries that have signed the Accords.

The UAE, for instance, has a deep and complex relationship with Iran. Despite being known for its assertive foreign policy and leading role in normalizing relations with Israel, the UAE remains a key trading partner of Iran and hosts a significant Iranian community and businesses. Although their relationship did deteriorate following the Abraham Accords, with Iran criticizing the UAE's decision as a direct threat to its security, and the UAE accusing Iran of supporting Houthi attacks on a key oil facility in Abu Dhabi in January 2022, the UAE and Iran were able to contain tensions and even fully restore their diplomatic ties.⁴ However, the increasing military and security presence of Israel in the Gulf region, particularly in close proximity to Iran, risks drawing Gulf Arab countries into the longstanding enmity between Israel and Iran, potentially leading to military confrontation with far-reaching consequences for the entire Gulf region.⁵

Towards a US-led militaristic regional order

Establishing normalized relations between Israel and Arab states has been a major goal of US foreign policy for a long time. In recent years, this goal has become even an urgent priority due to the changing global power dynamics, particularly the rise of China and the ongoing confrontation with Russia. As a result, the timing of the Abraham Accords is indicative of a significant shift in the US approach towards the Middle East, where there is a growing sense that the US is becoming less willing to involve itself in key regional affairs after years of failed military ventures and the withdrawal of its troops from Iraq and Afghanistan.

To address the great power competition and safeguard its strategic interests, the US is adopting an "offshore balancing" strategy, which involves reducing its direct and heavy military presence and interventions in the region.⁶ The US would entrust its allies with a greater collective responsibility to oversee matters of security and defense, while providing them with critical assistance and extensive military and security cooperation to prevent a power vacuum and to counter adversaries.

4 "UAE, upgrading ties with Iran, says envoy to return to Tehran within days," Reuters, 21/8/2022, accessed on 15/2/2023, at: <https://rb.gy/ct340x>

5 Paul R. Pillar, "Is Israel Slowly Building a Military Alliance in Persian Gulf?" The National Interest, 14/3/2021, accessed on 10/2/2023, at: <https://rb.gy/rwtaup>

6 John J. Mearsheimer and Stephen M. Walt. "The Case for Offshore Balancing: A Superior U.S. Grand Strategy." *International Security*, vol. 41, no. 2, 2016, pp. 5–48



Since the signing of the Abraham Accords, the US has ramped up its military support for Israel and its Arab allies in the region. The Trump Administration utilized the offer of arms as a tool to incentivize Arab governments to reach a deal with Israel. For instance, the United Arab Emirates was promised access to sophisticated weaponry such as F-35 fighter jets, MQ-9 reaper drones, and other advanced arms.⁷ Furthermore, the Trump Administration granted approval for the sale of 19 F-16V fighter aircraft to the Bahraini air force and upgrades for 20 other F-16s, which was previously halted by the Obama Administration due to human rights abuses.⁸ After Morocco expressed its intention to sign a peace agreement with Israel, the Trump Administration greenlit a \$1bn arms deal with Morocco that encompassed drones and precision-guided munitions. Together with endorsing Morocco's claim over the contested territory of Western Sahara, this US move has significantly increased tensions in North Africa, heightening the likelihood of conflict between Algeria and Morocco.⁹

The 2023 US defense budget, also known as the National Defense Authorization, features specific measures to facilitate a comprehensive regional security architecture.¹⁰ These measures include bolstering regional air defense systems and deepening military collaboration with Israel and Arab states that are party to the Abraham Accords, along with Egypt and Jordan. This approach supports the US' aim to reduce its direct military involvement in the region while maintaining its strategic interests through its regional allies.

Against this backdrop, many in the American foreign policy community regard the Abraham Accords as a significant accomplishment in leveraging the US strategy towards the Middle East.¹¹ Specifically, the accords provide a roadmap for integrating Israel and its Arab counterparts into a regional coalition. Article 7 of the agreement emphasizes the launch of a 'Strategic Agenda for the Middle East' which is intended to advance "regional security and stability".¹² This intent to expand the normalization process under the Abraham Accords framework is further reinforced by the Israel Relations Normalization Act of 2021, which was approved by the US Congress in March 2022 and directs the US Department of State to take specific measures to encourage the normalization of relations between Israel and Arab countries, based on the framework of the Abraham Accords.

The Pentagon has taken an advanced step towards integrating Israel and its Arab counterparts in military alliance by reassigning responsibility for military operations involving Israel from US European Command to US Central Command (CENTCOM). CENTCOM is responsible for overseeing military operations and multilateral exercises in the Middle East. This move is aimed at strengthening Arab-Israeli ties, particularly with countries that have been hesitant to formalize diplomatic relations with Israel. An example

7 Mike Stone and Patricia Zengerle, "Exclusive: Trump administration advances \$2.9 billion drone sale to UAE – sources", Reuters, 6/11/2020, accessed on 13/6/2023, at: <https://shorturl.at/nBT18>

8 Josh Lederman and Jon Gambrell, "Trump admin drops human rights conditions for Bahrain F-16s", AP News, 30/03/2017, accessed on 13/06/2023, at: <https://shorturl.at/imtyS>

9 Anthony Dworkin, "North African standoff: How the Western Sahara conflict is fueling new tensions between Morocco and Algeria," European Council on Foreign Relations, 8/4/2022.

10 H.R.7900 - National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2023, In the Senate of The United States (28/7/2022)

11 Lawrence J. Haas, "Why Joe Biden Should Leverage The Abraham Accords To Bring Stability To The Middle East," American Foreign Policy Council, 18/1/2022.

12 US Department of State, UAE-Israel Treaty of Peace, Diplomatic Relations, and Cooperation, 15/9/2020.



of this is the recent International Maritime Exercise 2022 (IMX 22), an 18-day biennial naval training event, led by US Naval Forces Central Command. This exercise involved the participation of the UAE and Israel, along Saudi Arabia and Oman, countries that have yet to establish formal relations with Israel. To further enhance military networking in the region, President Biden participated in the Jeddah Security and Development Summit held in Saudi Arabia in July 2022, where he joined the six member states of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), along with Egypt, Jordan, and Iraq. During the summit, President Biden restated the United States' pledge to enhance security cooperation with its allies and partners in the Middle East, primarily by creating "a more integrated and regionally-networked air and missile defense architecture".¹³

It is worth noting that Israel's possession of a technologically superior military allows it to leverage its leadership position in the emerging military partnership. The US administration remains committed to maintaining Israel's Qualitative Military Edge (QME) over Arab armies by granting it exclusive access to advanced US weapon technology.

Asymmetrical military collaboration

Historically, Israel has used the sale of weapons as a way to establish relationships with countries it doesn't have formal diplomatic ties with and advance its strategic interests. This tactic is often referred to as "weapon diplomacy."¹⁴ Prior to the Abraham Accords, Israel and several Arab countries engaged in clandestine security-related deals that involved substantial amounts of money. For instance, in 2007, the UAE hired an Israeli-owned firm called 4D Security Solutions to design a defense system for sensitive energy facilities and later awarded a \$6 billion contract to 4D's subsidiary AGT International to construct an advanced surveillance system known as "Falcon Eye" in Abu Dhabi.¹⁵

The past two years have witnessed an increase in military and security cooperation among the countries of the Abraham Accords. This cooperation includes joint military exercises, public and private investment in security and military technologies, intelligence-sharing, cybersecurity collaboration, and arms trade. However, it is worth noting that this cooperation seems to be a one-way as Israel is the primary source of arms manufacturing, technological know-how, and export to the Arab countries.

The Abraham Accords paved the way for an unprecedented boom in Israeli military industry, with contractors rapidly gaining a foothold in Arab markets. According to an Israeli contractor, UAE, Bahrain, and Morocco have been in talks with Israeli companies to buy "everything from advanced radar technology to cybersecurity systems".¹⁶ Israel's Ministry of Defense revealed that Israel's arms exports have increased by 55 percent since the accords were signed. This boost in arms exports has led to record-breaking revenues, with Israel's arms exports reaching an all-time high of \$11.3 billion in 2021, a 30 percent jump from the previous year's \$8.6 billion, with Gulf countries receiving 7% of total

13 The White House, Fact Sheet: The United States Strengthens Cooperation with Middle East Partners to Address 21st Century Challenges (16/7/2022).

14 Klieman, Aaron S. (1985). *Israel's Global Reach: Arms Sales as Diplomacy*. McLean, VA: Pergamon-Brassey's.

15 Rafeef Ziadah, "Surveillance, race, and social sorting in the United Arab Emirates," *Politics* (2021).

16 Dion Nissenbaum, "Israel's Defense Industry Is Big Winner Two Years After Abraham Accords," *The Wall Street Journal*, 9/10/2022, accessed on 6/2/2023, at: <https://rb.gy/lev52p>



exports.¹⁷ Former Israeli Defence Minister Benny Gantz has stated that in the two years since the Abraham Accords were signed, Israel has agreed to defence export deals worth \$3 billion with countries in the region. This has enabled Israel to emerge as the biggest winner of the accords, as the country's military industry.¹⁸

The partnership between the UAE and Israel has gained particular attention in recent years due to the increasing reliance of the UAE on Israeli arms. Among the Israeli military hardware that the UAE has acquired, the Spyder air defense and Barak missile systems have been the most significant.¹⁹ However, not all Israeli military products are available for sale, as Israel has declined a \$4.5 billion offer by the UAE to purchase the Iron Dome and David's Sling anti-ballistic missile defense system due to concerns over the potential transfer of sensitive technology to a third party.

In addition to arms acquisition, the UAE has attracted a substantial number of Israeli security and military companies to establish branches within its borders. This includes major arms manufacturers such as Elbit Systems and Rafael. These companies have also partnered in arms manufacturing, a trend that was demonstrated during the 2023 Naval Defence and Maritime Security Exhibition (NAVDEX) in Abu Dhabi. At the exhibition, it was revealed that the Israel Aerospace Industries (IAI) and the Emirati EDGE, both state-owned military companies, had jointly developed an unmanned patrol vessel equipped with advanced automatic systems, robotics, and sonar systems.

Bahrain and Morocco have been actively pursuing closer ties with Israel in the field of military technology and intelligence sharing. In recent months, Bahrain has been receiving training from Israeli intelligence agencies Mossad and Shin Bet, while Israeli naval officers are deployed along Bahraini and American counterparts for joint training in the Gulf. Moreover, Israel has agreed to provide Bahrain with both drones and anti-drone systems. In November 2021, Morocco and Israel signed their first-ever defence agreement in Rabat. This agreement has been described as "very significant" by then Israeli Minister of Defense Benny Gantz and is expected to allow for the exchange of ideas and joint projects, as well as enabling Israeli military exports.²⁰ Since signing the agreement, Morocco has been actively seeking to acquire Israeli-made weapons and technology. These include drones, radars, communication equipment, early warning systems, and "aggressive" systems for launching strikes against enemy targets. So far, Morocco has purchased the Barak MX air and missile defense system, the Skylock Anti-Drone System, and eVTOL drones.²¹

Conclusion

In conclusion, the Abraham Accords, hailed as a breakthrough in Arab-Israeli relations, have unveiled an intricate web of strategic and military partnerships that are far from fostering peace, stability, and prosperity. Rather, they have entrenched militarization through extensive arms trade and arms race. The true implications of the Abraham

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Alex Gatopoulos, "UAE arms deals: What weapons is the Gulf state buying and why?" Aljazeera, 9/2/2022, accessed on 25/1/2023, at: <https://rb.gy/qoucx>

²⁰ "Morocco, Israel sign first-ever defence agreement in Rabat," Aljazeera, 24/11/2021, accessed on 20/1/2023, at: <https://rb.gy/51usfm>

²¹ Arie Egozi, "Morocco: Latest Arab market to show interest in Israeli weapon systems," Defence Procurement International, 2/9/2022.



Accords have only just begun to unravel, and the consequences may prove detrimental to the region's stability in the long run.

Yet, recent developments regarding great powers' rivalry in the Middle East seem to have complicated the US efforts to form and expand a regional alliance under the Abraham Accords umbrella. Specifically, China's diplomatic foray into the region, which has steered Iran-Saudi rivalry toward diplomatic reconciliation, is complicating the Israeli strategic ambition for a regionwide normalization. The significance of the Saudi-Iranian peace stems from its direct consequences on the geopolitical landscape and power balance in the region, especially with regard to de-escalating conflicts in Yemen and Syria, among others.

Although the Abraham Accords sought to marginalize the Palestinian question from regional agendas, the ongoing violent escalation by the far-right Israeli government and Jewish settlers as well as the unwavering resistance of the Palestinian people have reaffirmed the centrality of Palestine to the Arab population. Multiple polls have indicated a rejection by the majority to normalize relations with Israel, even in countries participating in the Abraham Accords. This casts serious doubt about the sustainability of normalization, let alone the strategic objectives of the Abraham Accords. Furthermore, in the wake of the Iran-Saudi détente, the Saudi government has declared its unwillingness to normalize relations with Israel prior to a definitive agreement between the Israelis and Palestinians.

Ultimately, optimism surrounding the long-term implications of the Abraham Accords for regional peace is ill-founded. While there could be temporary benefits for certain Arab regimes, the reality is that the Abraham Accords constitute an abnormal arrangement that inadvertently exacerbates existing tensions and destabilizes the delicate equilibrium at the expense of the region's urgent needs for meaningful human development, human security, and cross-border solidarity for the many just causes in the region.



PRISME

Pathways to Renewed and Inclusive
Security in the Middle East



Tariq Dana

Dr. Tariq Dana is an assistant professor of conflict and humanitarian studies, Doha Institute for Graduate Studies. He was an adjunct professor at Northwestern University-Qatar, and served as the director of the Center for Development Studies at Birzeit University, a senior research fellow at Ibrahim Abu-Logoud Institute of International Studies, the Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies in Geneva and the School of Oriental and African Studies. He is also an associate editor of Middle East Critique and a policy advisor for the Palestinian Policy Network (Al-Shabaka). He has published widely on the Middle East and Palestine affairs.



PRISME

Pathways to Renewed and Inclusive
Security in the Middle East

PRISME Initiative

PRISME aims to redefine the conception of “security” in the Middle East and North Africa, as the starting point for strategic relations between MENA countries and their European and North American partners. It does so in pursuit of effective, collaborative approaches to ensuring a more peaceful and stable future. To this end, PRISME sponsors dialogue and debate between foreign policy professionals across diverse backgrounds and perspectives. These include individuals in governments, thinktanks and academic institutions located in the MENA region, Europe and North America, with a specific focus on engaging young and emerging thinkers and practitioners. Its goal is to re-define security in the Middle East, broadening the definitions of what it looks like, for whom, how it can be achieved, and how outside actors can contribute to it.

SALAM Project

SALAM (Sustaining Alternative Links beyond Arms and the Military) proposes to rethink the centrality of the arms trade in international relations with and among Middle East & North Africa (MENA) countries.

It fosters and amplifies ideas from a network of scholars and practitioners working in and with the Middle East. Issues they will address include the arms trade’s advertised role in cementing bilateral and multilateral ties between North America, Europe and the MENA region; the opportunity costs of over- or sole reliance on weaponry as security; and alternative modes of engagement that might redefine a shared strategic agenda.