About the Study

The normalization agreements known as the Abraham Accords, which Israel signed with the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain on the White House lawn on September 15, 2020, marked a historic shift in Israel-Arab state relations and heralded an era of new cooperation and dialogue between Israel and other countries in the region. However, it also upended the conventional wisdom that normalization with the Arab world would only come after an Israeli-Palestinian peace agreement, a formula intended to incentivize Israel to form a compromise with the Palestinians. With Sudan and Morocco having subsequently begun their own normalization processes with Israel and additional Arab states possibly intending to do so soon, how does this impact the Israeli-Palestinian sphere? Could a more interconnected region benefit Israelis and Palestinians and foster an environment more suitable for peace? This study analyzes to what extent, if at all, the recent series of Israel-Arab state normalization could help advance a two-state outcome to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and offers policy recommendations on how to leverage the normalization agreements to create tangible changes on the ground that could help preserve the two-state window until more fortuitous political circumstances arise.

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Foreword

Ambassador Martin S. Indyk

Recognition is the normal way that states relate to each other. Yet for most of its seven decades of existence Israel has been denied that recognition, and the normalization of relations that goes with it, by most of its Arab neighbors. The absence of Arab-Israeli normalization has been a defining feature of regional politics and a persistent impediment to American interests, slowing the peace process, complicating alliances, and hindering coordination against shared security threats.

Although Israel reached peace agreements with its immediate neighbors Egypt and Jordan under U.S. auspices in 1978 and 1994 respectively, and received recognition from the PLO in 1993, decades passed before another Arab state established formal ties with Israel. At the outset of the Oslo Israeli-Palestinian peace process many Gulf and North African states took steps toward normalizing relations with Israel. But they were quickly reversed once the Palestinian intifada broke out in October 2000. Then in 2002 the Arab states in unison, through the Arab Peace Initiative, expressly conditioned normalization on a resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. It was only in 2020 that the United Arab Emirates would break this linkage and formalize its relations with Israel, followed in rapid succession by Bahrain, Sudan, and Morocco.

These historic Abraham Accords, signed just over a year ago, marked a welcome development for the United States, Israel, and the normalizing Arab countries. However, the Israeli government, the Arab governments, and the Trump administration, which facilitated the accords, came to them
with an eye toward compartmentalizing their relations and separating them from the resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, not using them to help resolve it.

That naturally raised questions about how prospects for Israeli-Palestinian peace might be impacted by Israeli-Arab agreements predicated on sidelining that very issue. The continued absence of the majority of the Arab states, most prominently Saudi Arabia, from the normalization process, may indicate that the old model has not yet been rendered completely irrelevant. Nevertheless, old assumptions can no longer be relied upon to guide U.S. policy on the relationship between Arab normalization and the resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The challenge for policymakers now is to reconcile the apparently contradictory impulses embodied by the Abraham Accords and a future two-state solution between Israelis and Palestinians.

This study makes an important contribution to this discussion by offering a strikingly insightful appraisal of the proposition that Israel-Arab state normalization can contribute to Israeli-Palestinian peace. Based on their realistic assessment, Michael Koplow, Shira Efron, and Evan Gottesman lay out creative recommendations for leveraging these developments in the service of preserving and promoting both normalization and the viability of a two-state outcome. Their study provides an incisive evaluation of the motives driving all of the players as they adjust their approaches to the new dynamics unleashed by the Abraham Accords.

The basis of good policy begins with the abandonment of wishful thinking. The authors have done policymakers and the interested public a considerable favor by doing just that. From this foundation, hopefully new breakthroughs to normalization can be achieved that advance the cause of Middle Eastern peace in all its dimensions.
Introduction

For decades, Israel’s only formal relationships with any Arab states existed in the form of two rather cold peace agreements with its immediate neighbors, Egypt and Jordan. Although many Arab countries have never waged a war with Israel, and some even shared both clandestine business and defense ties to coordinate against shared enemies like Iran, nearly all lacked official relations with Israel. The prospect of Israel and other Arab governments opening official relations long appeared blocked by the absence of Israeli-Palestinian peace given the prominence of the Palestinian national cause in Arab state and societal discourse, a position formalized in the Arab Peace Initiative adopted by the Arab League in 2002. However, the events of the past twelve months challenged this view, with the signing of the Abraham Accords (normalization between Israel and the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain, later joined by Sudan), and the resumption of suspended Israel-Morocco ties on the pathway to full normalization.

With this historic shift, some contend that the Abraham Accords removed regional acceptance as the main incentive for Israel to forge a compromise with the Palestinians, and therefore diminished the already low likelihood of resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, while others argue that normalization can reap rewards for Palestinians as well as Israelis and advance the peace process. Although future normalization cannot be written off as easily as before, the fact also remains that the majority of Arab countries, most notably Saudi Arabia, still do not share official ties with Israel. Regional normalization has not yet and is not going to inevitably result in progress on the Israeli-Palestinian front, but there are pathways forward by which Israeli-Arab normalization can result in successfully advancing Palestinian national interests along with Israel’s wider acceptance throughout the Middle East.
The objective of this paper is to analyze to what extent, if at all, the recent series of Israel-Arab state normalization agreements can help advance a future two-state outcome to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. While the paper touches upon some of the many immediate benefits (as well as negative knock-on effects) of these normalization agreements for Israel, the normalizing Arab countries, the Palestinians, and the United States, this is not the main focus of our research.

This study is based upon an extensive review of the literature on Israel-Arab state relations, news sources, and interviews with Israeli and Palestinian officials, as well as subject-matter experts based in the United States, Israel, the West Bank, Gaza, and the Persian Gulf. It begins with an examination of the evolution of Israel's ties with different Arab states dating back to 1945, noting the nuances that define individual governments' approaches to the Arab-Israeli wars and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Building on this evolution of ties, the study then explores broader regional trends that explain why it is not likely that the Abraham Accords or future normalization will automatically translate to Israeli-Palestinian peace. Nonetheless, the study concludes with a series of modest policy recommendations on how to leverage the normalization agreements to create tangible changes on the ground that could help preserve the two-state solution window until political circumstances change within Israel, the Palestinian territories, and the United States for a meaningful peace process.
Background: Evolution of Ties Between Israel and Arab States

There are twenty-two Arab countries, including the quasi-state Palestinian Authority. These countries achieved independence at different times, and they have charted different courses in their relationships with global powers. They operate under different systems of government and play host to diverse local cultures. While each of the Arab states has rejected Israel in some form over the course of the Jewish state’s formation and existence, their actual involvement in the Arab-Israeli wars and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has varied greatly. This section notes the differences in policies between the conservative monarchies of the Persian Gulf and the Arab states that were on the frontline of the conflict with Israel, such as Egypt, Jordan, and Syria. This is followed by an analysis of the divergent motivations some Arab states, particularly among the Gulf countries, have had for dialing back tensions with Israel via back-channel relationships as well as public diplomacy based around a principle of peace-for-normalization, and examines why in 2020, four countries—the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Bahrain, Morocco, and Sudan—began to open relations with Israel, upending the peace-for-normalization dynamic.

1945-1979: Uniform Rejectionism, Varying Degrees of Activism

From the outset of the Arab-Israeli conflict, all Arab countries formally opposed Israel’s existence. Yet while Israel and states like Egypt, Syria, Jordan, Iraq, and Lebanon fought several wars, the role of more distant Arab states in the military conflict was largely superficial. Although some of the frontline Arab states would position themselves as standard bearers of
nominally anti-imperialist politics, countries like Kuwait, Qatar, Bahrain, the UAE, and Oman were still British protectorates when the State of Israel was established in 1948 and would remain so until the 1960s and ’70s.

Then, as now, Saudi Arabia was the most important of the Gulf Arab states in terms of political, military, and religious influence. American support for Zionism and a prospective Jewish state in Palestine emerged as an early source of disagreement between the United States and Saudi Arabia when President Franklin Roosevelt first met Ibn Saud, the inaugural Saudi king, in 1945.¹ But even Riyadh’s active involvement in the Arab-Israeli conflict was limited. For instance, during the First Arab-Israeli War of 1948-49, Riyadh dispatched just a few hundred soldiers for deployment under Egyptian command.² The Saudis likewise sent only token forces alongside other Arab states in the Six-Day War of 1967 and the 1973 Yom Kippur War.³

Far more consequential was the Gulf countries’ political positioning in pan-Arab institutions and their participation in oil embargoes against countries perceived as supporting Israel. When the other Gulf states gained independence from the United Kingdom in the second half of the twentieth century, they were quick to conform to the Arab world’s shared positions on the Arab-Israeli and Israeli-Palestinian conflicts. Newly independent Kuwait joined the other Arab governments in unanimously adopting the Khartoum Resolution at the 1967 Arab League Summit.

featuring the famous “three nos” directed at Israel: no peace, no recognition, and no negotiations.\textsuperscript{4} The remaining Gulf states achieved sovereignty in 1971,\textsuperscript{5} and the UAE, Qatar, and Kuwait supported Saudi Arabia in the OPEC oil embargo, which was imposed on the United States and several other countries following the 1973 Yom Kippur War and lifted in 1974.\textsuperscript{6} The embargo’s brief yet severe impact elevated Riyadh’s role in shaping U.S. Middle East policy.

\textbf{1979-2002: A Changing Region and Normalization-for-Peace}

The Egypt-Israel peace treaty of 1979 dramatically changed the political dynamic in the Middle East, moving the center of gravity in the Arab-Israeli relationship away from the frontline states. The Arab League voted to suspend Egypt’s membership, relocate the organization’s headquarters to Tunisia, and recall all Arab state ambassadors.\textsuperscript{7} As Egypt’s political star fell, Saudi Arabia and the other Gulf states had an opportunity to assume the leadership mantle Cairo once held. However, the new environment also presented risks to the rising Gulf powers from the region’s Soviet-backed regimes, which opposed both Zionism and the conservative Arab monarchies. Not wanting to hand a victory to the rejectionist states, Riyadh initially opposed isolating Egypt but caved under pressure from those same countries. Among the Gulf states, only Oman took a different path, opting to maintain relations with Egypt.\textsuperscript{8}

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item Ibid., 578.
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Iran’s 1979 Islamic Revolution also created a new security problem for many Arab states, which persists to this day. The newly established Islamic Republic of Iran took the place of the U.S.-aligned Pahlavi dynasty and challenged the legitimacy of the Gulf monarchies. These new dilemmas led Saudi Arabia and its neighbors to deepen security ties with the United States. But a closer Gulf-Washington relationship came with its own problems from the Gulf’s perspective; by the late 1970s, the United States was Israel’s primary political and military ally and the Gulf states’ cooperation with the Americans lent credibility to Iranian, Soviet, and other Arab state propaganda that cast the Gulf countries as Zionist stooges.

In this context, a new Israeli-Palestinian peace proposal presented in 1981 by Saudi Arabia’s then-Crown Prince Fahd served several purposes. It was both an attempt to defang anti-Gulf propaganda while also establishing Riyadh, from the U.S. perspective, as a middle-of-the-road leader in the Arab world. This was particularly important for the Saudi government in the early 1980s, which correctly assessed that pro-Israel groups on Capitol Hill would seek to block sales of advanced military equipment to the kingdom on the basis that Riyadh posed a threat to Israel. A diplomatic initiative on the Israeli-Palestinian front could counter negative perceptions about the Saudis.

Prince Fahd’s eight-point peace plan focused on the following tenets: (1) Israeli withdrawal from all territories occupied in 1967, “including Arab [East] Jerusalem;” (2) dismantling of all Israeli settlements in the occupied territories, including East Jerusalem; (3) freedom of worship

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at holy sites; (4) right of return for Palestinian refugees [displaced in 1948-49] and compensation for those who opt not to return; (5) a “transitional period” for the West Bank and Gaza Strip lasting several months; (6) the establishment of a Palestinian state [implicitly, in the West Bank and Gaza], with Jerusalem as its capital; (7) “all states in the region should be able to live in peace in the region;” and (8) the United Nations and its member states would implement these plans. While not stated outright, the plan effectively created the principle of opening Arab state relations with Israel in exchange for a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. A slightly altered version was presented at the Arab League’s Fez Summit in 1982.

The Saudi proposal introduced a number of important concepts that would inform Arab foreign policies toward Israel and the Palestinians for nearly four decades; namely, normalization for peace: the idea that the implementation of a two-state solution would lead to other Arab states establishing normal relations with Israel. Although it never fully embraced the plan’s substance, the Reagan administration welcomed the Saudi initiative, meaning Riyadh was at least partially successful in its objective of improving its credibility in Washington.

While the Arab states, largely under the aegis of Saudi Arabia, were working to make inroads in Washington with their diplomatic program, another important shift was underway. Previous

11 Jones and Guzansky, Fraternal Enemies, 32.
attempts at resolving Israel's disputes with its neighbors focused on the relationships between Israel and the Arab states of the Middle East with little to no attention paid to the Palestinians. In 1988, amid the First Intifada—the Palestinian uprising in the occupied territories—the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) issued a declaration of independence and a follow-up political communiqué. The latter document did not formally recognize Israel, but it did call for acceptance of United Nations Security Council Resolution 242, which called for Israeli withdrawal from territories occupied in 1967 and peace among all states in the region, signaling implicit support for a two-state solution. This shift in Palestinian policy helped to produce the U.S.-PLO dialogue, under which the Reagan administration initiated substantive talks with the PLO. This diplomacy laid the groundwork for future public engagement with the organization, most notably the peace process of the 1990s.

PLO support for Iraq during Saddam Hussein’s invasion of Kuwait and the subsequent Persian Gulf War massively damaged Arab state support for the Palestinians. PLO Chairman Yasir Arafat made pronouncements explicitly supportive of Iraq. In early 1991, shortly before the intervention of U.S.-led coalition forces against Iraq, Arafat declared in Baghdad: “Iraq and Palestine [would be] together, side by side.” As a result, the PLO lost $100 million in support from the Gulf states, who participated in the American-led coalition against Baghdad and the Palestinian leadership’s credibility suffered internationally. The Palestinian community in Kuwait,

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which numbered around 400,000 before the war, faced persecution in the aftermath of Iraq’s
defeat. Additional Kuwaiti restrictions were introduced and work permits were not renewed,
reducing the Palestinian population in the emirate to around 30,000 shortly after the coalition
liberated Kuwait.\(^{18}\)

It was in this context of Palestinian political vulnerability, post-Cold War consensus between
Washington and Moscow, and improved U.S. standing in the Middle East that the United States
and the Soviet Union co-sponsored an international conference in late 1991 in Madrid to
jumpstart the Israeli-Palestinian peace process. Because of objections by Israel’s right-wing
Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir, no official independent Palestinian delegation was permitted
to attend, but many Arab governments did send representatives to reflect a multilateral re-
gional approach. The Palestinians were represented nominally as part of a joint Jordanian-
Palestinian team.

The election of a center-left government in Israel under Labor Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin in
1992 and the onset of the Israeli-Palestinian peace process gave the Gulf states political cover
for greater engagement with Israel, building on policies like the 1981 Fahd proposal and the
1982 Fez proposal. Most Arab states supported the agreements signed between Israel and
the PLO in 1993-95, collectively known as the Oslo Accords, which established institutions of
interim self-government for Palestinians in the occupied territories with the aim of later resolv-
ing final-status issues. In 1994 Israel and Jordan signed a nonbelligerency agreement followed
by a peace treaty. The Oslo Accords led to the opening of Israeli trade offices in Oman and

Qatar. Israeli officials visited Bahrain, Oman, and Qatar; the latter two countries both hosted Israeli premiers: Rabin visited Muscat in 1994 and Shimon Peres visited Doha in 1996. After a right-wing Jewish extremist assassinated Rabin in late 1995, officials from several Arab states lacking formal relations with Israel attended the prime minister’s funeral in Jerusalem.

Tepid displays of public interaction between Israeli and Arab state officials complemented back-channel ties. There have been multiple instances of Israel and Arab countries cooperating on a number of fronts despite lacking formal ties. In the 1960s, Israel and Saudi Arabia found themselves on the same side of the Yemeni Civil War, with the Israeli military utilizing Saudi airspace to deliver weapons to royalist forces. Israel has also supplied surveillance technology to Arab countries; in the case of Morocco, this aspect of the relationship dates back six decades. Increasingly sophisticated Israeli equipment has been used by non-democratic governments to police dissent; by 2020, the Israeli spyware firm NSO had signed contracts with Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain, and Oman. Those deals benefited from the support of the Israeli government. Israeli businesspeople working through shell companies in Europe circumvented Arab League boycotts.

While back-channel ties continued to grow, the relatively high level of public interaction between Israel and Arab states during the 1990s was not to last. The peace process stagnated

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19 Jones and Guzansky, Fraternal Enemies, 36.
23 Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, Israel and the Arab Gulf States: Drivers and Directions of Change (Houston: James A. Baker III Institute for Public Policy, 2016): 11.
following Rabin’s assassination, the return of the right-wing Likud to power in Jerusalem under Benjamin Netanyahu in 1996, and an ongoing series of terrorist attacks by rejectionist Palestinian groups such as Hamas, which undermined public confidence in a non-violent resolution to the conflict. The wave of terrorism that came with the Second Intifada, beginning in 2000, along with severe Israeli military countermeasures, brought Israeli-Palestinian ties to their lowest point since the Oslo process began, and Israel-Arab state relations suffered in kind. In 2000, Qatar shuttered the Israeli trade office in Doha; Oman followed suit with the Israeli office in Muscat the following year.

2002-2020: The Arab Peace Initiative and a New Dynamic

In the spring of 2002, with Israel and the Palestinians in the throes of the Second Intifada, Saudi Arabia announced the Arab Peace Initiative (API). Under then-Crown Prince Abdullah’s leadership, the Arab League unanimously adopted the API, which carried forth the same general principle as the Fahd and Fez plans: the opening of official relations between Israel and Arab states in exchange for the implementation of a two-state solution.

Saudi Arabia’s decision to launch the API carried several potential political benefits for Riyadh. As was the case in the 1980s, the kingdom perceived Arab-Israeli diplomacy as a pathway to better relations with Washington. This was especially important in the context of the early 2000s. Saudi Arabia faced increased scrutiny in the United States after the terrorist attacks of

September 11, 2001, as 15 of the 19 al-Qaeda hijackers who crashed passenger jets into the World Trade Center and the Pentagon and unsuccessfully attempted to strike a third target in the Washington, DC area were Saudi nationals. In particular, there were concerns that Riyadh’s sponsorship of the fundamentalist Wahhabi form of Islam had played a role in the 9/11 perpetrators’ ideology. A new initiative to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict could demonstrate to U.S. policymakers and the American public that Saudi Arabia was a model for responsible leadership in the Middle East. Moreover, the Gulf states were sensitive to public opinion given images of violent Palestinian resistance and severe Israeli military retaliation in the midst of the Second Intifada. Playing a productive role in resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict could therefore also serve to reduce domestic tensions. This could also amplify Saudi Arabia’s prestige and influence in the Middle East.26

Israel never formally responded to the API. The initiative’s chances of resonating with the Israeli public were heavily compromised just prior to its formal release. On March 27, 2002, the day before the Arab League adopted the API, a Hamas suicide bomber killed 30 Israeli civilians, including a number of elderly Holocaust survivors, who were celebrating the Passover holiday at a hotel in Netanya. Hamas struck again on March 31, killing 15 Israelis at a Haifa restaurant.27 Following these attacks, Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon launched a major military campaign, Operation Defensive Shield, in the West Bank. While the Bush administration’s

Roadmap for Peace proposal, announced in 2003, called for a regional framework to support Israeli-Palestinian peace, it never directly mentioned the API.\textsuperscript{28}

It was during this period that back-channel ties between Israel and Arab countries, especially with the Gulf countries, developed most. In 2013, Israeli exports to the UAE (which lacked official relations at the time) reportedly amounted to $5.3 million USD, although the actual figure may be higher.\textsuperscript{29} Press reports indicated that even before normalizing ties, some 300 Israeli businesses were operating in the UAE, mostly through international (European and American) intermediaries.\textsuperscript{30}

Like the Bush administration, President Barack Obama supported the principle of normalization-for-peace embodied in the API. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu had suggested to American officials that he would be amenable to certain concessions toward the Palestinians, such as a settlement freeze in the occupied territories, in exchange for public gestures from Arab states that lacked official relations with Israel, in particular, a meeting with Saudi King Abdullah.\textsuperscript{31} In 2009, shortly after taking office, President Obama sent letters to the leaders of seven Arab countries, including Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain, Egypt, and Jordan, requesting

\textsuperscript{28} Ibid., 592.
\textsuperscript{29} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{31} Reidel, Kings and Presidents, 153.
“confidence-building” measures with Israel in order to incentivize steps toward a two-state solution. However, Abdullah shunned American-Israeli entreaties for a public meeting, indicating that Riyadh would be the last among the Arab states to formalize ties with Israel (separately, Netanyahu went on to impose a ten-month settlement freeze from late 2009 into 2010).

It may have been this Saudi policy, coupled with continued commitment to the API by Arab states, that led Secretary of State John Kerry to declare at a 2016 Brookings Institution program that “there will be no separate peace between Israel and the Arab world.” Respected analysts, including Philip Gordon, both a Biden and an Obama administration official, reached the same conclusion. The rationale underlying this assertion was that because the Arab states had already reaped most benefits from their secret ties with Israel, they have no incentive to turn quiet ties public and risk alienating their own publics and others in the region for leaving the Palestinians behind. Such arguments were lampooned following the Arab-Israeli normalization agreements struck in 2020, but they were reasonable viewed in the context of the time. In fact, much of the analysis remains relevant to the prospect that Saudi Arabia would normalize ties with Israel without much progress on the Palestinian front to show for it.

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33 Reidel, Kings and Presidents, 153.
Recent years witnessed growing alignment between Israel and many Arab states against Iranian expansionism in the Middle East and Tehran’s nuclear program, particularly following the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), colloquially known as the Iran nuclear deal, which was intended to act as a stopgap against the Islamic Republic’s atomic aspirations. Several Gulf states quietly criticized the U.S.-mediated deal, while Israel publicly opposed it. Yet with the informal relationships that developed between Israel and Arab states mutually fearful of Iran, the incentive for the Arab states to take the next step and make their arrangements with Israel official seemed unclear. Amid Barack Obama’s term in office, it might have been more difficult to foresee just how far a future president would be willing to go in order to induce Arab state normalization with Israel.

During the Obama administration’s second term and into the tenure of President Donald Trump, several Arab states began to receive more public and Congressional scrutiny over their policies and human rights records. For instance, the UAE was criticized for its role in the destructive Saudi-led military campaign against Yemen’s Houthis, and the U.S. Senate made an abortive attempt in 2019 to prevent the sale of guided bombs to the Emiratis. That same year, President Trump vetoed resolutions of disapproval against arms sales to the UAE and Saudi Arabia and invoked a “national security emergency” under the Arms Export Control Act in order to facilitate weapons transfers to those countries. With an administration amicably disposed

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toward transactional relationships, Arab states saw an opening to achieve more immediate policy goals in exchange for opening ties with Israel. This follows the pattern established by Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Jordan, and other states of leveraging Arab-Israeli diplomacy in order to make inroads in Washington.

In August 2020, the United States, Israel, and the UAE jointly announced a forthcoming normalization agreement. The following month, Israel and the Emiratis signed the Abraham Accords, joined by Bahrain. Before the formal signing ceremony even took place, the White House indicated that it would sell the UAE F-35 stealth fighter jets. Thus, the Emiratis achieved an objective that the previous administration had been unwilling to entertain in the first place. According to former U.S. Ambassador to Israel and current State Department senior advisor Daniel Shapiro, the Obama administration would not even brief the Emiratis on the aircraft’s capabilities. Emirati normalization was also framed as successfully extracting an Israeli concession on the Palestinian front—normalization was predicated upon Israel withdrawing plans for West Bank annexation, an idea enshrined in the Trump administration’s Peace to Prosperity proposal released earlier that year.

Sudan, which later acceded to the Abraham Accords, reached its own objectives. The new Sudanese leadership under General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, which had replaced the anti-Israel, Hamas-supportive regime of Omar al Bashir, was angling for relief from American penalties

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imposed against the North African country. In 2019, Sudan shuttered the local offices of Hamas and Hezbollah, and in October 2020, a normalization process with Israel was announced. True to form, the Trump administration rewarded Khartoum for normalizing with Israel, removing Sudan from the State Department’s lists of State Sponsors of Terrorism and Countries of Particular Concern for International Religious Freedom.\footnote{“U.S. Relations With Sudan,” United States Department of State, accessed January 12, 2021, https://www.state.gov/u-s-relations-with-sudan/} Morocco, which only announced a re-establishment of diplomatic relations with Israel and never formally joined the Abraham Accords,\footnote{In August 2021, Morocco and Israel announced that they would establish full diplomatic relations after the Biden administration confirmed that they would not unroll the Trump administration’s recognition. See Barak Ravid, “Israel and Morocco agree to full diplomatic normalization,” Axios (Arlington, VA), August 12, 2021, https://www.axios.com/israel-morocco-open-embassies-normalization-25bb3e25-569d-477f-93db-11e9b5a88f66.html.} received American recognition of its claims to the Western Sahara, reversing decades of bipartisan U.S. policy.\footnote{“The Israel-Morocco Peace Deal Is Roiling Western Sahara,” The Economist (London, UK), December 16, 2020.}

Bahrain, for its part, is widely viewed as a Saudi client state and is unlikely to have proceeded with establishing ties with Israel without approval from Riyadh.\footnote{David D. Kirkpatrick, “Bahrain Says It’s Time to Embrace Israel. The Gulf Hears a Saudi Voice.” The New York Times (New York, NY), September 11, 2020.} This may indicate some interest from the Saudis in using Bahrain as a test case for the ramifications of normalization. In November 2020, a meeting was reportedly held at the site of the Saudi planned megacity of NEOM between Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, then-Prime Minister Netanyahu, and Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman, which only produced a Saudi denial that it had ever taken
Yet, as of this writing, the Kingdom remains firm in its position. Despite a strained relationship with the U.S. public and Capitol Hill over human rights, the war in Yemen, and the assassination of journalist Jamal Kashogghi, Saudi Arabia has not moved on normalization. At the same time, that four Arab states that began normalization processes or agreed to normalization with Israel in 2020 means a future shift can no longer be written off, nor can further normalizations with other holdouts in the Arab world. While the UAE and Bahrain insist that they continue to support the API,\textsuperscript{45} it is clear that the framework of normalization-for-peace no longer informs each Arab states’ relations with Israel.

**Barriers to Leveraging Normalization for Israeli-Palestinian Peace**

The Abraham Accords, representing the beginning of a normalization process between Israel and Sunni states beyond the peace treaties with Egypt and Jordan, are an important step forward for the region. Failure to recognize Israel is a vestige of an unjust standard against which no other country is exposed, but attempting to isolate Israel also impeded wider regional integration and economic development. The benefits to Israel and to regional normalizers are both obvious and already apparent, from greater coordination on security threats emanating from Iran, to trade and investment deals, to tourism, with tens of thousands of Israelis flocking to the Emirates in the first post-normalization year despite the global pandemic.


\textsuperscript{45} Jacob Magid and Raphael Ahren, “UAE, Bahrain back Arab Peace initiative after spurning it to ally with Israel,” *The Times of Israel* (Jerusalem, Israel), September 15, 2020.
Starting with economics, the most obvious beneficiaries are Israel and the UAE. As the Israeli and Emirati foreign ministers wrote in a joint op-ed in the Financial Times in September 2021, in one year the countries established embassies, conducted high-level in-person diplomatic visits (COVID restrictions notwithstanding) that led to research, investment, and trade agreements, and spurred entrepreneurial partnerships on “artificial intelligence, the green economy, space exploration, content development and water security.” Trade between the two countries is projected to grow in both goods and services, and investment is expected to be substantial in energy (including Israeli gas fields and a controversial joint pipeline⁴⁷), Arab-Israeli businesses,⁴⁸ and fintech and digital banking.⁴⁹ A RAND Corporation analysis showed that this might only be the tip of the iceberg and under certain conditions, if normalization expands to additional countries and the region enters a comprehensive free trade agreement, it could create some four million new jobs and lead to more than $1 trillion in new economic activity over a decade.⁵⁰

There is also an obvious and apparent benefit to the United States, which no longer has to deal with hurdles to greater coordination among U.S. regional partners; one early example of this is the January 2021 integration of Israel into United States Central Command (CENTCOM) and shifting it out of the European Command (EUCOM), a step that would have been less likely absent the normalization process.\textsuperscript{51} Defense Department officials observed in announcing the move that “[t]he easing of tensions between Israel and its Arab neighbors subsequent to the Abraham Accords has provided a strategic opportunity for the United States to align key partners against shared threats in the Middle East.” Israel’s integration into CENTCOM, mirroring the Abraham Accords, brought ties that had existed for over a decade into the open. CENTCOM chief General Kenneth “Frank” McKenzie said as much when visiting Israel immediately after the agreements, describing the move as “formalizing” a preexisting relationship.\textsuperscript{52} According to military analysts, incorporating Israel into CENTCOM has many benefits, including improving integration, relieving some burden from the U.S. military to regional partners, promoting regional security frameworks, enabling joint military exercises that include the IDF, and creating a forum for communicating across countries that have not normalized ties.\textsuperscript{53}

Amid all this, however, remains the outstanding question of whether the Abraham Accords can be leveraged or expanded to create progress on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. While normalization is beneficial on its own and should continue to be pursued, Israel’s conflict with the Palestinians will remain even if every Arab League state establishes diplomatic relations with Israel. Whereas the API established a model of normalization being the prize for an Israeli-Palestinian final status agreement, the Abraham Accords in practice severed the link and the sequence between those two outcomes.

This is not to suggest that any consideration of the Palestinian dimension is absent from the normalization process. Emirati Ambassador to the United States Yousef al-Otaiba wrote in Israel’s Yedioth Aharonoth newspaper immediately after his country and Israel announced normalization, “The UAE will remain an ardent and consistent supporter of the Palestinian people—for their dignity, their rights and their own sovereign state. They must share in the benefits of normalization.”54 Editorial and opinion pages in pro-government and government-owned Gulf papers explained that winds of change in the region can help energize the peace process. For example, an editorial in the Emirati outlet The National explained, “The Palestinian-Israeli conflict has been deadlocked for decades. In the absence of a solution agreed upon by both parties, the UAE’s decision to maintain open communication with both sides could prove conducive for positive change. Aggression and escalation cannot end long-standing conflicts. It is now time to give diplomacy a chance.” A column in the UAE-based Gulf News went further, suggesting, “The Middle East will open a new chapter today. For the first time in 26 years, two

54 Yousef Al Otaiba, “Annexation will be a serious setback for better relations with the Arab world,” Ynet, June 12, 2020, https://www.ynetnews.com/article/H1Gu1ceTL
Arab states and Israel will sign a peace treaty aimed at paving the way for a forward-looking, prosperous, and stable region... [The accords] aim to kick-start the dormant peace process, based on the internationally recognized right of the Palestinian people to their independent state with Jerusalem as its capital.”

Signatories to the Accords, especially the UAE, have argued that normalization would give them greater economic, diplomatic, and geopolitical leverage over Israel, pushing the latter to make concessions that would benefit the Palestinians. Khalaf Ahmad Al-Habtoor, an influential businessperson and commentator, wrote in Arab News, “Together with Egypt and Jordan, which signed peace treaties with Israel in the past, the UAE and Bahrain are the seeds of hope that are destined to grow into permanent Middle East peace. Until now, the Israelis felt empowered to take a hard-line stance on just about everything connected with the Palestinians, largely because they could and because they had absolutely nothing to lose. It stands to reason that, the more Israel is connected with its Arab neighbors on multiple levels, the more it will be open to making compromises.” Moreover, and far more explicitly, normalization between Israel and the UAE was specifically conditioned on Israel putting a temporary freeze on its plans to pursue unilateral annexation of part of the West Bank.

However, despite statements that normalization can advance the Israeli-Palestinian peace process and support different aspects of the development of a Palestinian state, how exactly that

56 Conversation with an analyst based in Abu Dhabi, remote, April 5, 2021.
would happen remains unclear. In multiple interviews, conferences, and Track II meetings over the last year, analysts said that if only the Palestinians were willing to support normalization, it would help them economically and politically. However, this line of reasoning falls short of providing detail, process, and strategy for bringing all parties, not only the Palestinians, on board. The fighting between Hamas and Israel in May 2021 was illustrative of the challenges, indicating that the normalizers’ desire and ability to use leverage over Israel with regard to the Palestinian conflict is limited. The normalizers confined their newfound public influence to issuing statements condemning Israeli military action, falling short of going beyond words to signal their displeasure or doing anything that would tie their relationships with Israel to Israeli actions in the same way that the UAE had previously when it linked normalization with halting annexation. Israeli military operations in Gaza did not lead to a suspension of normalization, the withdrawal of diplomatic staff, or a temporary halt to ongoing projects that had arisen out of the formal establishment of relations.

This was not surprising in context—after all, normalization explicitly severed the chain linking Arab bilateral relationships with Israel to its actions in the Palestinian sphere—but it also demonstrated some of the limits of the argument that normalization has granted Arab states a greater degree of influence with Israel and that those states are willing to wield that influence in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in a high profile or pressurized way.58 This may not always be the case; a longer round of violence involving more Palestinian casualties and fighting that

58 According to an Israeli analyst familiar with the issue, the UAE did act behind the scenes expressing their concerns about the fighting directly to Israeli defense officials and explaining that the hostilities could force them to enact actual steps that affect normalization. Yet, there have not been public reports of this activity.
involves not only Hamas—a Muslim Brotherhood affiliate that the UAE and Bahrain consider a terrorist organization—could in the future lead to more explicit action on the part of the normalizing countries. So far, however, the causal chain of normalization increasing the likelihood of Israeli-Palestinian peace is not apparent.

In terms of prospective normalizers, Saudi Arabia—the highest priority of any normalization process from Israel's perspective—remains committed to the peace-for-normalization model as of this writing, though that model may also proceed in a concurrent fashion across escalating stages. Thus, the assumption that normalization will only follow from an Israeli-Palestinian peace agreement no longer holds, and the question becomes to what extent an Israeli-Palestinian agreement and normalization agreements between Israel and Sunni states will converge, be pursued on entirely different tracks, or unfold concurrently, as some have suggested that Saudi Arabia would no longer condition normalization with a resolution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict but would reward Israel with normalization steps for meaningful constructive actions vis-a-vis the Palestinians.

**Barriers to Leveraging Normalization Gains to Advance the Peace Process**

Despite official statements and hopes that the Abraham Accords have ushered in a new era that could lead to diplomatic breakthroughs region-wide, there are a variety of reasons to be skeptical that the many gains represented by the Accords will translate into gains on the Israeli-Palestinian front. Following years of thawing ties between Israel and its neighbors, it should
perhaps not have been surprising to see those ties translate into formal public diplomatic relations irrespective of the state of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict or Israeli actions in the West Bank and Gaza. A shared threat perception of Iran, a recognition that Israel represents a permanent fact in the region, appreciation for Israel's technological capabilities and entrepreneurial nature, a renewed focus on stability in the wake of the Arab Spring uprisings and protests, a desire to prepare for post-fossil fuel economies and address climate change, and frustration with Palestinian leadership have all contributed in removing what was effectively a Palestinian veto over normalization. As we detail below, there are avenues that can be pursued to attempt to translate regional normalization into progress on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. But before that can happen in practice, the obstacles to such progress should be noted.

**Regional Indifference**

It is difficult to look at the current landscape in the Middle East and conclude anything other than that most governments have largely moved on from the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, even if their respective publics have not. Popular opinion toward diplomatic recognition of Israel is still overwhelmingly negative in most Arab countries, yet that has not impeded normalization from proceeding. Arab leaders still pay lip service to the Palestinian cause and two states in a nod to their domestic political considerations that still warrant it, but the era of the infamous Khartoum “three nos” or Arab oil boycotts is long past. Arab states have more pressing concerns, from Iran’s quest for regional hegemony, to the fallout from the Syrian civil war, to their

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own restive populations. The Trump Peace to Prosperity plan, with its radical departure from a
traditional two-state position, was not widely embraced by the United States’ Arab partners,
but it did not cause waves among them either. The same can be said about other Trump-era
policies and decisions, such as recognition of Jerusalem as Israel’s capital and the relocation
of the American embassy.

Even though the publics in Sunni states still care about the Palestinian issue and although
Sunni leaders are vulnerable to accusations by Iran, Turkey, and others blaming them for throw-
ing the Palestinians under their bus, these leaders themselves view the Israeli-Palestinian con-
flict more with indifference than they do with pressing concern, leading them to seek to dis-
tance their own stances toward Israel from the Palestinian issue. This does not mean that
Sunni states will actively look to undermine the Palestinians, but it does mean that they will be
increasingly reluctant to go along with unyielding Palestinian positions without a compelling
reason to do so.

American and Arab State Transactionalism

As it stands, it is difficult to envision many other Arab states calling for diplomatic concessions
from Israel in exchange for normalization. Unlike the United Arab Emirates, which publicly pred-

ion-trump-middleeast-peace-plan.html.
61 Nahal Toosi, “Trump’s Jerusalem Bet Defies Direst Predictions,” Politico (Arlington, VA), May 13, 2018,
icated normalization on canceling West Bank annexation, the other three Arab states that either normalized ties with Israel or initiated a process of normalization under the Trump administration—Bahrain, Sudan, and Morocco—did not make any such requests. Conversely, Israel has no reason to expect that it will be asked to make concessions.

The exception to this rule may be Saudi Arabia, which is both the most politically influential Arab state in the Middle East and, consequently, the government with which Israel most desires normalization. Riyadh is also currently navigating the most difficult environment among Arab states facing Washington, with bipartisan criticism over its human rights record, assassination of journalist Jamal Khashoggi, and the war in Yemen.62 According to an Israeli Foreign Ministry official, the Israeli government may see an opportunity in Saudi Arabia’s quandary.63 Similarly, a PLO official described Saudi Arabia as the “crown jewel” of the normalization process and speculated that Washington and Riyadh might coordinate to put normalization on the table in order to “kick off a peace process” between Israelis and Palestinians.64 It should be recalled that Arab states, and Saudi Arabia in particular, have previously leveraged Israeli-Palestinian diplomacy in order to make inroads with the United States, whether surrounding arms sales in the early 1980s or to relieve scrutiny surrounding its role in 9/11 some twenty years later with the release of the Arab Peace Initiative. More recently, the UAE’s effort to normalize relations with Israel may have been motivated in part by an interest in reducing negative

63 Discussion with an Israeli Foreign Ministry official, remote, March 2021.
64 Discussion with a PLO official, remote, January 2021.
publicity on Capitol Hill surrounding its own participation in the war in Yemen, as well as the Libyan conflict.⁶⁵

Given the transactional nature of the Arab states’ outlook on normalization, expectations should be set accordingly. The Trump administration’s willingness to abandon once firm foreign policy tenets for Arab-Israeli normalization stands in contrast with the Biden administration’s outlook. President Biden declared an end for U.S. support for the Saudi-led campaign in Yemen and released a declassified version of a CIA report documenting Riyadh’s responsibility for Khashoggi’s assassination, a move previously blocked by Trump. Arms sales to the UAE initiated by Trump were also initially suspended for review by Biden. While Biden has stated his support for Israeli-Arab normalization both as a candidate and in office and his administration has not rolled back Trump’s policies and incentives related to ties between Israel and the four Arab normalizers, it is unlikely that the Biden administration will offer such far-reaching incentives as billions in controversial arms sales to any state, let alone Saudi Arabia, in order to coax normalization with Israel.

Deepening engagement and cooperation between U.S. partners in the Middle East is in Washington’s interest. American commitments, including military support, have been crucial in cementing previous deals between Israel and other states in the region. Four decades before the controversy surrounding the Trump administration’s arms deals with the UAE, the Carter administration committed significant military and economic assistance to Egypt, making Cairo

the second-highest recipient of U.S. aid. Yet that support, a result of the Israel-Egypt peace treaty, helped to bring Egypt out of the Soviet Union’s orbit, definitively ended decades of hot war between Israel and Egypt that had cost thousands of lives, and produced an Israeli withdrawal from occupied Egyptian territory. With or without American concessions and normalization, there is no threat that Saudi Arabia, or the UAE for that matter, will gravitate toward a hostile power so long as the current regimes in those countries continue to exist. Riyadh and Abu Dhabi remain aligned with Israel and the U.S. against Iran with or without U.S. involvement. Accordingly, normalization with Arab states located further afield may not command the same urgency today from the Biden administration as resolving conflicts between Israel and the frontline Arab states. In this environment, the primary objective the United States should seek to pursue is normalization for the sake of normalization, and where American concessions are needed, they should be consistent with U.S. interests in the Middle East writ large and carried out with a reasonable expectation that they can be fulfilled from administration to administration.

**Interests Over Ideology**

Aside from indifference, there is a more active dynamic at play, which is the elevation of tangible interests over ideological concerns. Opposition to Israel and support for the Palestinian cause was one of the strongest binding forces among Arab states in the second half of the
twentieth century. Not only did it function as a boost for Arab nationalism, it also helped perpetuate Arab authoritarianism by providing regimes with a source of legitimacy that avoided elections, meaningful political reform, or functioning economies that did not rely on rents from natural resources or entrenched patrimonialism. Appeals to siding with the Palestinian cause were powerful enough to override any potential benefits that might accrue from engaging with Israel.

That region-wide calculus has begun to shift, in some cases definitively. Arab states have a confluence of shared interests and shared threats with Israel and no longer want their foreign policies held hostage to the lack of resolution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, which these governments do not view as a core or existential interest. Normalization with Israel brings benefits that are widely evident, making it harder to make the tradeoff of spurning the upside of engaging Israel in order to pursue a policy based on an ideological imperative. The Abraham Accords were not driven by a desire to solve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict; they were driven by a completely unrelated set of interests. Israel’s covert relationships with Arab states were largely motivated by the desire to counter Iran more effectively. However, under the Abraham Accords and the short-lived normalization efforts in the 1990s, Arab states have appeared to prioritize political gains vis-a-vis the United States alongside the economic side of the ledger in bolstering ties with Israel. Given the public nature of trade and investment and the concurring

visible benefits, as opposed to the security relationships that take place out of view, it is even harder to spurn an interests-based policy in favor of an ideological one.

Compounded by the Palestinian cause not being as potent of a unifying force as it was decades ago, the cost-benefit analysis made by Arab states is now swinging toward capturing the gains that have been lost by publicly boycotting Israel. This does not mean that universal normalization is automatically going to occur, as the ideological and historical constraints have not been entirely swept away. Further, the Abraham Accords process demonstrated that external inducements—such as those provided by the U.S. under Trump—will play an outsized role. There is also a midrange possibility, which is that states will slowly develop ties with Israel that fall short of diplomatic recognition or full normalization. They can do so in the same manner that the UAE proceeded for years before the Abraham Accords, which would allow them to benefit from having ties with Israel while still paying some degree of public fealty to Palestinian nationalism. Or they can take small public normalization steps in exchange for meaningful Israeli concessions toward the Palestinians that still fall substantially short of compromising on the final status issues. But it is impossible to conclude in a post-Abraham Accords world that normalization with Israel will continue to be blocked simply because of an ideological imperative or the overwhelming weight of public opinion.

This shift toward interests over ideology makes it difficult to leverage the Abraham Accords to create progress on the Israeli-Palestinian front. Arab states have far more to gain from a strong relationship with Israel than they do from holding this relationship back in order to support the Palestinians, whether it be in the realm of economics, security, technology, or tourism. Holding
up those gains unless and until Israel makes meaningful concessions to the Palestinians or implements deep changes in its West Bank policies does not comport with an Arab state focus on tangible interests. That equation could shift were the Palestinian issue a large factor in Arab domestic politics, but despite public opinion that is weighted heavily toward the Palestinian cause, the Abraham Accords states made the calculation that this no longer presents an absolute barrier that cannot be overcome. Put simply, many Arab leaders want to establish a relationship with Israel that is not filtered through the prism of Palestine or the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

**Frustration with Palestinian Leadership**

A variable that should not be discounted is widespread frustration and discontent with Palestinian leadership. Arab leaders, both publicly and privately, have criticized Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas and Palestinian leaders for what they view as ossified positions and unwillingness to adapt to changed circumstances or engage with outside actors. There is additional weariness at Palestinian Authority corruption and a sense that Palestinian leaders expect Arab states to fund and prop up the Palestinian Authority without any accountability. This dynamic makes it difficult for the Abraham Accords to serve as a wider platform for Israeli-Palestinian peace, as regional leaders have no great affinity for Abbas or the current Palestinian leadership more widely and thus are not inclined to expend much political capital or influence on their behalf. This can be seen in the UAE’s record of contributions to the United

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Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA). Over the past decade, Emirati contributions to UNRWA fluctuated, but the overall trajectory was an upward trend, with support peaking in 2019, when the UAE was the Palestinian refugee agency’s fourth largest supporter among individual donor states at $50 million. In 2020, the same year the UAE opened relations with Israel, Emirati contributions dropped to just $1 million. Following the announcement of the normalization agreements, the UAE and Bahrain both reportedly cut their contributions to UNRWA, interpreted as a message to the Palestinians not to continue objecting to their decision to establish formal diplomatic ties with Israel.

In the case of the UAE, the relationship between Emirati leaders and Abbas veers closer to toxicity than to frustrated indifference. Abbas’s nemesis, ex-Fatah security chief Muhammad Dahlan, lives in exile in Abu Dhabi and is a confidant of Emirati Crown Prince and de facto ruler Mohammed bin Zayed, which on its own has caused a feud between Abbas and the UAE. Emirati officials are clear that while they want to assist the Palestinian cause, they have little interest in doing anything to boost Abbas or the PA, or to even work with the PA directly. Given that any movement toward an Israeli-Palestinian final status agreement will necessarily involve Palestinian leadership, this makes a deep investment toward that goal on the part of the most important Arab participant in the Abraham Accords impossible to envision absent transformational change on the Palestinian side.

72 Interview with Palestinian official, remote, January 2021.
Lack of Knowledge or Interest in the Dynamics of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict

One of the ways in which the Abraham Accords may be utilized to create progress on the ground on Israeli-Palestinian issues is by having normalizers become more enmeshed in the daily rhythms of the conflict, giving them insights into where and how they can use their influence with both sides. That scenario, however, is currently absent. The UAE, Bahrain, and Sudan had little involvement in Israeli-Palestinian issues before the Abraham Accords and there is an incentive on their part to keep their bilateral ties with Israel separate from those with the Palestinians.

There is a low base of knowledge about the fundamentals of the conflict among the policy and academic communities in Abraham Accords states, with few scholars or programs dedicated to this issue in think tanks and policy institutions. The unfamiliarity with core issues was demonstrated at the outset of the Abraham Accords, when the initial statements announcing the normalization agreements indicated that the UAE and Bahrain had endorsed a change to the status quo on the Temple Mount, which the text of the agreements then walked back following the negative attention that ensued. There is more familiarity in Morocco, which established and chairs the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation’s al Quds (Jerusalem) Committee. However, in Morocco little has changed that would engender greater interest from Rabat in the minutiae of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict; it has not actually acceded to the Abraham Accords and maintained a fairly close de facto relationship with Israel even before 2020.

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This dynamic may transform with the exchange of ambassadors, more tourists from the region traveling to Israel, greater engagement between Abraham Accords signatories and Palestinians, or fighting between Israelis and Palestinians that is wider-ranging than this past May’s military exchanges over Gaza that could make the Accords’ signatories become more involved than they are currently inclined. But the evidence in the year since the Abraham Accords were announced does not so far demonstrate this to be happening. Much as the normalization agreements were driven by factors unrelated to the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians, the trend so far has been to continue walling off the conflict from the growing ties between Israel and normalizing states. One of the only signs of greater public engagement with the Palestinian issue came in April 2021 with an Emirati statement condemning Jewish right-wing extremist attacks and referring to East Jerusalem as occupied.74

Furthermore, the Abraham Accords countries should not be viewed as monolithic; each had distinct reasons for pursuing normalization, and that will remain true when it comes to engaging with the Palestinian issue. While the UAE has done the most to build substantive partnerships with Israel across various sectors, even Abu Dhabi had separate interests to pursue, including acquisition of American F-35 stealth fighter jets and burnishing its image in Washington as a state with a tolerant society. For its part, Sudan appears to have far less interest in being involved on the ground in any meaningful way and pursued normalization primarily, if not solely, in order to receive benefits from the United States. To the extent that normalization with some of these countries was driven by outside factors only tangentially related to Israel, and

primarily by American incentives, it is unlikely that they would become more deeply involved in Israeli-Palestinian issues absent another substantial external push. That presents a challenge to making normalizers greater stakeholders in the conflict.

**Israeli Views of the Conflict**

Even if Abraham Accords countries evince a desire to become actively involved in brokering a resolution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, there is no way around the widespread Israeli conviction that the conflict is more amenable to management than to resolution. Unlike other instances when the U.S. or other outside actors were able to play a helpful external role in bringing parties together—including with the Abraham Accords themselves—there is little appetite within the current Israeli government or any conceivable alternative Israeli government for a comprehensive peace process with the Palestinians. Prime Minister Naftali Bennett speaks about “shrinking the conflict,” which is a euphemism for conflict management, albeit a more constructive version. At the same time, he says there will not be a Palestinian state. Part of the Abraham Accords’ popularity with Israelis stems from the demonstration that normalization with other states in the region does not necessarily have to be tied to peace with the Palestinians or held up by its absence, especially given Israeli public opinion that the conflict with the Palestinians is not currently amenable to resolution.

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Israelis also overwhelmingly support these normalization agreements because they have not demanded any Israeli concessions, save temporarily taking West Bank annexation off the table. Any deal with the Palestinians would carry real costs, which is among the reasons why a final status agreement remains so elusive. While Abraham Accords states can conceivably be helpful in reducing some of those costs—particularly when it comes to compensating or absorbing Palestinian refugees—it does not change the fact that the Abraham Accords have not fostered an environment in Israel that is more conducive for peacemaking with the Palestinians.

Palestinian Hostility to Normalization

There are barriers to leveraging the Abraham Accords for Israeli-Palestinian progress on the Palestinian side as well. The Palestinian reaction to the announcement of the normalization agreements was unreserved condemnation. Palestine leadership viewed the Accords as a betrayal of the Arab Peace Initiative framework, which conditioned normalization on Israel first reaching a negotiated agreement for a Palestinian state, and thus as a betrayal of the Palestinian national cause itself. The Palestinian Authority not only slammed the normalization agreements and the parties involved, but also initially withdrew its ambassadors from the UAE and Bahrain in protest.

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In the ensuing months, the Palestinian position softened somewhat, partially out of recognition that the Accords were not going away and partially in order not to isolate themselves from the region any further.\textsuperscript{77} When Morocco announced that it was restoring its ties with Israel after a two-decade hiatus, the official Palestinian reaction was muted. While Ramallah hopes that going with the flow rather than against it might induce normalizers to press Israel for greater Palestinian freedom of movement and access to natural resources in the West Bank, the reality is that the Palestinian leadership is not going to reverse course entirely. The Palestinian position remains against normalization with Israel outside of the Arab Peace Initiative framework, and actively trying to use the Abraham Accords as a vehicle for progress on Palestinian statehood would be a tacit admission that the Arab consensus represented by the API is officially dead.

**The Absence of a Motivated External Actor**

In order for the Abraham Accords to be leveraged in the Israeli-Palestinian sphere, it will be critical to have a strong external actor that can marshal the process and is motivated to do so. The logical actor for this role is the United States, but the Biden administration has not embraced this role in a substantially involved way. The Trump administration utilized the normalization process as a way to further isolate the Palestinians, and notwithstanding the clear benefits of the Abraham Accords, they were a replacement for the failure of the Peace to Prosperity plan rather than an effort to involve the Palestinians or craft Israeli-Palestinian peace. In this way, they operated as a bypass around the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and beyond statements

\textsuperscript{77} Interview with Palestinian official, remote, January 2021.
encouraging the Palestinians to come to the table before their own position deteriorated further, the Trump administration demonstrated no interest in linking normalization with an Israeli-Palestinian agreement.

The Biden administration is supportive of a traditional two-state outcome, as well as of the normalization process, but has little interest in getting enmeshed in Middle East issues and perhaps even less interest in expending time and effort on an Israeli-Palestinian peace process. Biden is supportive of the Abraham Accords, but is unlikely to devote real energy to convincing the UAE, Bahrain, Sudan, or Morocco to use their relationships with Israel to push for productive measures toward the Palestinians or to use any influence they have with the Palestinians to push them toward concessions. As we have previously stated, Biden is unlikely to hand out U.S. policy concessions to normalizers in order to get them to engage on the same scale and of the same nature as those doled out by the Trump administration. That means that the pattern that has been established of Israel engaging with normalizing states in a bilateral fashion on issues that do not involve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is likely to continue unimpeded. Absent a strong effort by the United States otherwise, it will be hard to translate the Abraham Accords and the step forward that they represent for the wider region into a more narrowly crafted step forward for Israeli-Palestinian peace. However, as we recommend below, the Biden administration has an opportunity to orchestrate normalization in a way that pushes both Israelis and Palestinians to take independent constructive steps that can help keep the door open for a two-state outcome when political conditions are more ripe.
**Recommendations: Toward Progress on the Israeli-Palestinian Front**

Notwithstanding all of these challenges, there are a number of avenues for leveraging the normalization process toward progress on the Israeli-Palestinian front. None of these will definitively lead to a permanent status agreement between Israel and the Palestinians, and expectations must be tempered given that one purpose of the Abraham Accords was to compartmentalize the Israeli-Palestinian issue from the wider question of Israeli integration into the region. Yet there are ways for the Accords to create progress on the last remaining true vestige of the Israeli-Arab conflict without sacrificing the new dynamic created by the normalization agreements.

**Capitalize on Israeli Desire to Expand the Process Rather Than Arrest It**

The normalization agreements with the UAE, Bahrain, and Sudan and the agreement to resume ties with Morocco represented the logical first candidates for normalization. These were states that had already advanced relations with Israel in a more far-reaching manner than other Arab countries, or were seeking something tangible from the United States that was within the realm of possibility. Getting other states to sign on was always going to be an uphill battle, and was further complicated by the May 2021 fighting between Israel and Hamas and tensions in East Jerusalem, which resulted in the Abraham Accords states issuing relatively harsh statements condemning Israeli behavior. The new Israeli government wants to continue the normalization process, but the barrier to further normalization was never about Israel’s desire to expand the group of normalizing countries.
Israel does not want the Abraham Accords to represent a singular moment in time and is eager to maintain the Accords’ momentum. As the benefits to Israel of normalization become even more obvious and tangible, this will create pressure on any Israeli government to seek ways of enticing more states to normalize relations with Israel. States like Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Kuwait have been clear in their public statements that they require movement on the Palestinian issue to advance any normalization process, and this will incentivize Israel to make more progress with regard to the Palestinians in order to get to the next tier of potential normalizers.

The United States can play a productive role in laying the groundwork for a new series of normalization agreements by consulting with potential normalizers on what their requirements are with regard to Israeli-Palestinian issues, and working with Israel to implement measures that will pave the way for expanding the Abraham Accords to new signatories. The United States can also provide more limited incentives than it did during the initial normalization phase—expanded trade agreements, for instance, rather than large arms sales—to entice more countries to sign on to normalization.

Given the new Israeli government’s stated support for “shrinking the conflict” with the Palestinians, continued regional sympathy toward the Palestinians, and the Biden administration’s stated goal of promoting constructive steps that could pave the way toward a two-state solution when political realities shift, normalization could be leveraged to promote substantial economic, political, and security gains for the Palestinians that would otherwise not be plausible. Signaling a positive shift, Israel now formally seeks to strengthen the PA, although in practice mostly economically. Israeli Defense Minister Benny Gantz met with President Abbas in
Ramallah in August 2021, in the first ministerial engagement with Abbas in over a decade.\(^{78}\) Meretz ministers also visited Abbas in October 2021.\(^{79}\)

Following the Gantz meeting, Israel announced several important measures, including a NIS 500 million ($155 million) loan to the PA; 15,000 new permits for Palestinians to work in Israel; the addition of 1,000 Palestinian workers to the tourism sector; notional approval for issuance of building permits for Palestinians in Area C; and examining the status of undocumented Palestinians in the West Bank. Notwithstanding their importance, these steps fall quite short of what the PA itself deems as necessary. The PA list shared with the Biden administration includes steps in Jerusalem (maintaining the status quo on the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif, reopening Palestinian institutions shut down in the city since 2001); the release of prisoners and the return of bodies of those killed and held by Israel; territorial dimensions (changing the status of areas in the West Bank from C to B, and B to A, handing over some planning and jurisdiction in certain parts of Area C to the PA); crossings, borders, and trade (return of Palestinian crews to the the Allenby Bridge connecting the West Bank with Jordan, reopening the Damieh Crossing bridge that serves as a commercial border crossing between the Palestinian Authority, Jordan and Israel); establishing an international airport in the West Bank, and reviewing and improving Palestinian export routes by air, sea, and land, including a free trade zone


and storage areas at the Allenby Bridge.)80 Israel is very far from approving most of these steps.81 Yet, in this space between the two sides’ position there is an opportunity to demonstrate meaningful gains to the Palestinians and ameliorate their opposition to normalization.

On the political front, even though almost two-thirds of the Israeli coalition parties formally support a two-state solution, Prime Minister Bennett and his partners on the right continue to voice opposition to the idea of a Palestinian state and to even meeting with Abbas.82 There is reason to believe that if Yair Lapid becomes premier in two years as planned, he could push for a two-state solution. For now, however, it is Gantz who has the most influence over the Palestinian issue in the government, and in a September 2021 interview he said that the Palestinians need to come to terms with the principle that no settlement will be removed from the occupied territories.83 In practical terms, the important economic steps that the Bennett-Lapid government is taking to strengthen the PA are disconnected from a larger political goal of laying the groundwork for a Palestinian state. Here is where normalization might make a difference. Tying more meaningful steps to strengthen the PA to expansion of normalization could incentivize Israel to compromise further on these political issues, starting with less controversial steps and building up to a possible renewed Israeli commitment to a two-state solution.

As indicated below, even short of final status negotiations, transformative steps on the ground

80 The list is not public. It was provided by the PA to Biden Administration officials and includes 16 categories, many of which are broken down into specific items.
81 Conversation with a senior IDF officer, in person, Tel Aviv, September 13, 2021.
that would demonstrate real benefits to Palestinians are bound to tone down Palestinian objections to normalization and incentivize them to cooperate more fully with the normalization process.

**Saudi Arabia As The Big Prize**

Any discussion of normalization inevitably turns to Saudi Arabia as the most influential actor among Arab states and as the country that would represent the largest success for Israel were it to normalize relations. Saudi Arabia is also the state that is historically most sensitive to the need for progress on Israeli-Palestinian issues in order to advance its bilateral relations with Israel, and it is not coincidental that the previous paradigm that reigned under the Arab Peace Initiative was led by Saudi Arabia. Notwithstanding leadership changes in Saudi Arabia and marginalization of the Palestinians’ concerns by Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, there still appear to be factors constraining the Saudi leadership from going ahead with normalization without some linkage to the Palestinian issue, whether it be the influence of King Salman or pressure from conservative Saudi elites and the Saudi religious establishment. Using normalization as a way to improve the prospects for Israeli-Palestinian peace will still hinge more than anything else on the role that Saudi Arabia is willing to play.

Any hypothetical Israeli concessions will be more far-ranging in an effort to achieve Israeli-Saudi normalization than they will with any other Arab state. The question will be whether Saudi Arabia remains unwilling to normalize short of a full Israeli-Palestinian permanent status agreement, or whether—like the UAE—it is willing to do so in return for a large public concession.
Signals point to the latter, yet there has not been concrete action to demonstrate a formal change in position. Should it be the latter, there are a variety of ways in which Saudi normalization with Israel can create real progress and lasting change in the direction of two states without a definitive Israeli-Palestinian peace deal.

Two of the pressing obstacles to a two-state outcome are Palestinian presence in Area C and Palestinian rights in East Jerusalem. In both of these areas, Saudi Arabia is in a position to push for changes from the Israeli government that will improve Palestinian quality of life and create real momentum toward two states. In both East Jerusalem and Area C, it has been virtually impossible over the past decade for Palestinians to get building permits from the Israeli government. While the new Israeli government has announced its intention to issue thousands of Palestinian building permits in Area C, the decision has not yet been implemented, and will represent the aberration rather than the norm if it indeed goes through. The extreme scarcity of building permits creates an ongoing crisis cycle of illegal, unpermitted Palestinian construction that is met with Israeli demolition orders. Notwithstanding the limited measures that the Bennett government has announced, there is still far more space for serious reform. If Saudi Arabia were to make reform of the permitting process and a moratorium on demolitions of unpermitted structures until such reforms are instituted, or insist on a territorially defined Israeli building freeze in Area C, or request redesignating part of Area C as Area A or B, as conditions of new normalization measures such as expanded overflight rights or public trade agreements or the opening of a trade or liaison office in Tel Aviv, it would be a positive and significant step toward establishing the territorial contours of a future two-state outcome.
Focus on Gaza

The Abraham Accords states could possibly be helpful in Gaza reconstruction following the May 2021 conflict and support development in the Strip, while limiting the influence of Hamas relative to the PA. After the May 2021 clashes in Gaza, analysts called for greater involvement of Arab countries, and the normalizing states in particular, in the reconstruction of Gaza and in charting a more sustainable political path forward. There were various assertions that at the very least, Arab normalizing countries, existing and new ones, will be integrated in the post-war reconstruction and support strengthening the PA in Gaza and encouraging its return to the Strip. Specific calls were made to have the UAE and the “pragmatic” Arab countries substitute Qatar as the main source of assistance in Gaza. 84 Others went so far as to suggest that the normalizing countries should become part of an advisory council, which would include representatives of the PA, NATO countries, and Arab countries, and run Gaza’s affairs, including by having a military presence to prevent the resurgence of Hamas forces and other terrorist organizations. 85

The problem with all these ideas is that they have low viability in the near future unless current trends shift. Because of its considerable wealth, the UAE is the main country among the normalizers being mentioned with regard to supporting Gaza. However, the UAE is neither inter-

ested in assisting Hamas, the de facto rulers of Gaza and an affiliate of the Muslim Brotherhood (which the UAE sees both as domestic and regional threat), nor is it interested in supporting the PA, with which it has had poor ties for years. In addition, the UAE, like other normalizing countries, has an interest in separating its bilateral ties with Israel from those with the Palestinians. In the context of Gaza, this has day-to-day implications. For example, Israel heavily restricts the import of materials it considers as dual-use into Gaza, even for internationally-funded humanitarian projects. Donor countries have frequent, often unpleasant conversations with Israeli defense officials on delays in approvals for items. As one member of the international community told us, “Abu Dhabi does not want to argue with Israel about the diameter of steel pipes the latter would allow or not allow for an Emirati-funded desalination project in Gaza. That could get in the way of the bilateral business stuff they really care about.”

According to some experts, the UAE can be convinced to help stabilize the situation in Gaza under four conditions: first, it would be part of a coalition but not the sole contributor. Second, it would not lead the initiative, but rather follow Egypt at the helm. Third, its involvement would come at the behest of the United States, which would explicitly ask for its help (in other words, it would not volunteer for the job). Finally, Abu Dhabi does not see itself as a “wallet,” an underwriter of the status quo. It would be willing to lend a hand to Gaza as part of a comprehensive

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86 Dual-use items refer to products and technologies normally used for civilian purposes, but which could have military applications. Israel controls its exports of dual use goods, like many other countries. In addition to dual-use items listed under international treaties, Israel places additional restrictions on dual-use exports to the Palestinian territories. Steel pipes, for example, are uniquely restricted as Hamas and other factions in Gaza use them to manufacture rockets that are used to strike Israel.

87 Discussion with a senior member of the international community, remote, May 25, 2021.
strategy for dealing with the Strip.\footnote{Discussion with a former Israeli senior official who reported conversations about this topic with Emirati officials, remote, July 20, 2021.} The absence of a U.S.-led holistic strategy for Gaza, combined with the UAE’s aversion to helping either the PA or Hamas and its bilateral interests vis-à-vis Israel, casts serious doubts as to the UAE’s interest in becoming more involved in Gaza’s affairs at the moment. However, if the U.S. develops a strategy for Gaza that brings in normalizing countries as well as other constructive players—mostly Egypt and Europe—capitalizing on Israeli understanding that the old Gaza policy is not sustainable, all while maintaining the goal of a peaceful two-state outcome, it could help harness the Abraham Accords to the benefit of the Palestinian people.

Short of such a U.S.-led initiative, it is possible that the combination of normalization and intra-Gulf trends could lead to an indirect positive Emirati influence in Gaza. Recently, after a four-year rift, ties have been improving between Qatar and the Arab Quartet (UAE, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Bahrain).\footnote{“Qatar names Saudi envoy as Gulf ties improve,” \textit{Al-Monitor} (Washington, DC), August 12, 2021, \url{https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2021/08/qatar-names-saudi-envoy-gulf-ties-improve#ixzz74HCygbbe}.} This improvement was evident in Qatari support for Egypt’s mediation efforts between Israel and Hamas after Operation Guardian of the Walls in Gaza in 2021. When Egypt pledged $500 million for Gaza’s reconstruction, Qatar promised to match it, on top of the $360 million it already provides Gaza in assistance annually.\footnote{“Qatar pledges $500 million for Gaza’s reconstruction,” \textit{i24 News} (Tel Aviv, Israel), May 26, 2021, \url{https://www.i24news.tv/en/news/middle-east/1622051615-qatar-pledges-500-million-to-gaza-s-reconstruction}.} Israel has welcomed and facilitated this assistance, estimated at more than $1 billion since 2012, in order to improve the humanitarian situation in Gaza and prevent an escalation.
Nonetheless, the UAE, Egypt, and other regional allies are wary of Israeli-Qatari cooperation on Gaza, as they see Doha as one of the main backers of the Muslim Brotherhood, a political Islamist movement these countries have banned and even consider as a terrorist entity. Closer ties among the Gulf countries could make it easier for Israel to continue cooperating with Qatar with other Arab state support.\textsuperscript{91} Further, these closer ties could incentivize Doha to exercise more constructive leverage on Hamas and contribute to stability in Gaza.\textsuperscript{92} The August agreement to channel Qatari assistance to poor families in Gaza via the U.N., rather than directly through Hamas, is the first example of a positive such development. Nonetheless, even with improved inter-Arab ties, normalizers’ involvement in Gaza is likely to remain limited due to the influence of Qatar and Egypt, with whom other future actors in the Strip would have to be closely aligned. To the extent that normalizers can play a positive role in Gaza, however, it will demonstrate that Gaza can be an opportunity for normalization to impact the Israeli-Palestinian conflict rather than present an intractable challenge.

**Greater Involvement for Egypt and Jordan**

While the focus has been on the new normalizing states, Egypt and Jordan have had peace ties with Israel for decades. American, Israeli, and other international attention focused on the UAE—and the obvious economic and reputational benefits the UAE is reaping as a result of normalization—could spur Egypt and Jordan to become even more involved than they have


\textsuperscript{92} Ibid.
been and to do so publicly, which will entail not only improving relations with Israel but paying
greater attention to their respective spheres of influence within the Israeli-Palestinian arena.
Trying to be part of the solution on the Israeli-Palestinian front and lowering the overall temper-
atture will also benefit Egypt in particular in Washington, where Cairo is under intense criticism
for human rights abuses and is not viewed as a force for stability or for furthering U.S. interests.
The Abraham Accords can be leveraged effectively to create pressure through positive incen-
tives. Egypt and Jordan do not want to be left out of the circle and would thus play a larger role
in addressing Israeli concerns while working to create better conditions for the Palestinians.

This dynamic has already been playing out with Egypt in Gaza since 2014, but more so follow-
ing the May 2021 Israel-Hamas conflict, where Egypt is currently taking a very public active role
in allowing access through its border with the Strip, facilitating reconstruction, and enforcing
the ceasefire. Egypt has also begun to take a lead role in reviving the Israeli-Palestinian peace
process through floating the idea of a regional conference that would bring all of the influential
actors together. Alongside these developments, the inauguration of a new Israeli government
in June 2021 was followed by a number of high-level exchanges between Israeli, Egyptian, and
Jordanian officials. Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett met with King Abdullah in Amman in
July—the first meeting between an Israeli premier and the Jordanian monarch since 2018.93

93 “Bennett met secretly last week with Jordan’s King Abdullah in Amman,” The Times of Israel (Jerusa-
in-amman-reports/.
shortly thereafter, King Abdullah spoke with Israeli President Isaac Herzog.\(^9\) Finally, in September, Bennett met with Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, the first public meeting between an Israeli prime minister and an Egyptian president in a decade.\(^9\)

If Washington recognizes Egypt’s contributions by upgrading bilateral ties and facilitating new economic agreements between Jerusalem and Cairo, it will serve as a model for renewed engagement in the Israeli-Palestinian sphere that can benefit all sides. For all of the focus on the new and future normalizers, there is a lot of leverage and influence that can be exerted by the old ones. While some aspects of Israel’s rapprochement with Egypt and Jordan can be attributed to the end of Netanyahu’s controversial stewardship of his country’s foreign relations, this diplomatic improvement should also be viewed as part and parcel of the normalization process despite formal ties between Jerusalem and Amman and Cairo preceding the Abraham Accords by decades.

**Urge Palestinian Involvement in Abraham Accords Initiatives**

The normalization agreements have already led to deals on trade, scientific and environmental cooperation, and tourism, among other areas. While these agreements can be confined to Israel and the Abraham Accords states, they should include Palestinian involvement wherever

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possible (e.g., religious tourism; renewable energy; free trade zones; etc.). The $3 billion Abra- ham Fund, established following the Accords to fund a variety of joint Israeli-Emirati projects with the hope that other countries would join later, excluded the Palestinians by design. The fund, which was by some accounts “dead on arrival,” and since then suspended indefinitely by the Biden Administration, could be a model for real multilateral investment framework in regional projects that would involve the Palestinians and benefit the Palestinian private sector in the West Bank and Gaza. Given Israel’s interest in strengthening the PA (mostly economically at this stage), there is incentive for all involved to ensure that the Palestinians benefit from the new regional paradigm shift. For instance, a dedicated Palestinian free trade zone in the Jordan Valley from which they can export to and import from Arab countries could provide real economic benefits while bolstering Palestinian sovereignty. This idea is part of what the PA would like to see the United States push for, and bringing it or similar initiatives with tangible benefits into fruition could lower Palestinian rejection of normalization.

**Let Abraham Accords States Take Credit for Breakthroughs**

Giving normalizing states credit for any breakthroughs on the Israeli-Palestinian front will increase their willingness to be involved Israeli-Palestinian issues and make any Israeli concessions more politically palatable. This is the dynamic that played out with regard to annexation, and it is replicable across the board. The popularity of normalization with the Israeli public far

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96 Discussion with a U.S. diplomat, Tel Aviv, March 15, 2021.
outstripped the popularity of West Bank annexation, and once the UAE clearly stated in no uncertain terms that the former could not advance unless plans for the latter were suspended, it created an incentive structure for Israeli decision makers that pointed in only one direction. It also made normalization more politically viable for the UAE by allowing the Emirati government to claim credibly that it had stood up for Palestinian rights as a condition of normalization.

Leveraging the popularity of normalization with the Israeli public can work in this sphere on other issues beyond annexation. If future normalizers—Saudi Arabia in particular—lay the same choice at Israel’s feet as the UAE did with regard to annexation, and connect normalization to the controversial issues mentioned above such as turning over parts of Area C to PA control, reopening PA institutions in East Jerusalem, freezing new settlement construction beyond the security barrier, or forswearing annexation permanently, Israelis’ desire for normalization can eliminate some of the political costs associated with these ideas when they are presented as Israeli concessions that bring no immediate tangible gains. By the same token, such steps would correct the impression that the normalization process deserted the Palestinians, and instead demonstrate that normalization could deliver tangible benefits for them as well, thus ameliorating resentment and incentivizing the Palestinians to explore further how they can gain from the normalization process in their pursuit of statehood.
Conclusion

In September 2021, at a virtual event marking one year since Israel, the UAE, and Bahrain signed the normalization agreements on the White House lawn, U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken outlined a vision of the Abraham Accords that has been expressed many times previously by officials in Jerusalem, Abu Dhabi, Manama, and Washington, and by American pundits and think tank analysts: “We all must build on these relationships and growing normalization to make tangible improvements in the lives of Palestinians and to make progress toward the longstanding goal of advancing a negotiated peace between Israelis and Palestinians.”98

The notion that the Abraham Accords can benefit the Palestinians—and, by extension, advance the objective of resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict via a two-state outcome—is, in principle, correct. The addition of four, and possibly more, Arab states to Israel’s roster of diplomatic partners could mean deeper engagement from Arab parties that both Israelis and Palestinians can theoretically trust on thorny issues like the status of East Jerusalem Palestinian neighborhoods, settlements, or Palestinian building in the West Bank’s Area C. In the case of wealthier countries like the UAE, normalizers can facilitate and contribute humanitarian and development aid to the Palestinians, particularly in Gaza, reducing the immediate risk of conflict there. Normalization also has the potential to raise the profile of Egypt and Jordan, allowing those states, with decades-long ties with Israel, to take a more leading role on the Palestinian question.

The problem here, put simply, is that the normalizers have shown scant interest in taking these steps on their own. The record of the normalizing states before and especially after opening up relations with Israel has only reinforced the impression that they are not interested in taking on a wider portfolio when it comes to the Israeli-Palestinian issue. Even though the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is still something that Arab publics care about, and normalizers are sensitive to criticism from Iran, Qatar, Turkey, and others of selling out the Palestinians, other considerations have thus far proved more important. Here, some of the fault lies with the Trump administration, which executed the deals in a transactional manner deliberately aimed at separating Arab state-Israel relations from a resolution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Ultimately, however, no one forced the normalizers to establish relations with Israel. While there have been myriad benefits to both Israelis and the normalizers, they already shared substantive covert ties; had the UAE or the other Abraham Accords parties not wanted to establish ties with Israel, it would have been a fairly easy choice. The fact remains that the normalizers simply no longer view their relations with Israel through the prism of its conflict with the Palestinians.

There is some room for optimism, however. The transition to a new American administration means new priorities in Washington. While the Trump administration was happy to bifurcate Israel-Arab state and Israeli-Palestinian ties in service of a pro-annexation agenda, the Biden administration is supportive of a two-state solution. This, along with partisan domestic politics, likely accounts for the relative tepidity the Biden administration has shown in addressing the Abraham Accords, despite supporting normalization in principle. Yet if the Trump administration’s record shows anything, it is that normalizing Arab states can be incentivized to take big
diplomatic steps in exchange for positive reinforcement from the United States. By this token, the Biden administration should try to induce greater participation on the part of the normalizers and play a central role in enmeshing Israeli-Palestinian progress in the continuing unfolding normalization process. There is no guarantee that it will be successful, but it is clear that the initiative must come from Washington. We recognize that this may not be the most inspiring readout of Israel-Arab state relations, but we believe it is realistic, and it is a far more favorable alternative than doing nothing at all.

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