Leveraging the Abraham Accords for Progress on the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict

Critical Neighbors

Egypt, Jordan, and the Israeli-Palestinian Arena

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Leveraging the Abraham Accords for Progress on the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict

Two years into the normalization process known as the Abraham Accords, this new feature of Arab-Israeli affairs seems to have evolved in several unforeseen ways. While some of these developments pleasantly surprised the Accords sponsors and signatories, others were disappointing. These surprises include:

- Normalization has progressed at a faster pace than expected.
- The anticipated expansion of the Accords by additional countries signing on has not materialized.
- Declarations of the death of the Arab Peace Initiative (API) have proven premature.
- The initial expectation that normalization could be insulated from the effects of developments in the Israeli-Palestinian arena has been challenged.

This memo seeks to shed light on the bottom line:

Given that the initial perception of the Accords as bypassing the Israeli-Palestinian issue has given way to efforts by many (including signatories and other parties) to leverage the Accords in seeking progress on the issue, what should and can be done to make that happen?

Below please find our four individual perspectives on these questions.

The opinions and proposals expressed in these pieces are only reflective of the respective authors’ opinions and do not necessarily reflect the policies or positions of Israel Policy Forum.
An Israeli Perspective

Bad News at the Root of Potential Good News

by Nimrod Novik

In setting the stage for a concrete suggestion for leveraging the Abraham Accords to stabilize the Israeli-Palestinian arena and salvage hope for a future peace process, it is important to consider three relevant contexts: Israeli, Palestinian, and regional.

Israel: Warnings Ignored

In recent weeks, security correspondents have reported on the Israeli government’s belated awakening to the explosive situation in the West Bank. Though some placed the blame exclusively on the Palestinian Authority, most spared no criticism of Israel’s decade-long policy of strengthening Hamas in Gaza while weakening the PA in the West Bank. Worse yet, even at this critical juncture, senior security officials censor subordinates’ recommendations so as not to present members of the cabinet with information they prefer not to hear.

The reality of an over three-year endless election eve seems to be at play here. On the one hand, cabinet members realize the need for a swift and meaningful change of course to restore stability by strengthening the PA and restoring some of its legitimacy, thereby bolstering the legitimacy and durability of its security coordination with Israel. On the other hand, they are deterred from doing so lest the leader of the opposition, former Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, manipulate such efforts for his election needs by presenting them as surrendering to terror. Thus, hope that no major catastrophe occurs prior to the November 1 election substitutes for taking action.

Palestinians: An Urgent Need for Legitimacy

Israeli reports of over a dozen incidents where Palestinian security officers turned their weapons against IDF units remind me of the words of a Palestinian security chief who, well over two years ago, shared his “worst nightmare” with a visiting Israel Policy Forum leadership delegation. His message was that in the absence of a political horizon, his troops were perceived by family, friends, and others, as “subcontractors of the Israeli occupation, if not traitors,” and “the moment would come when they yield to peer pressure and seek rehabilitation by turning their weapons on Israelis.”

The lack of national elections for well over a decade and a half and other un-democratic practices, the widespread perception of PA corruption and poor governance, and the failure to demonstrate that the PA is the vehicle driving Palestinians to statehood and independence all have contributed to the Palestinian public wishing to see its government and leadership gone. Arab-Israeli normalization (both the Abraham Accords and subtle, yet significant steps taken by other states) amid continued
Israeli settlement expansion and routine IDF operations throughout the West Bank is seen as a betrayal of their cause, further aggravating public despair.

Cognizant of the explosiveness of these trends, yet true to his commitment of non-violent resistance, the Palestinian president, Mahmoud Abbas (Abu Mazen), has sought to regain some credibility by getting the attention of the international community. However, even there his efforts have been met with potent pushback. For example, in recent meetings with senior American diplomats, Palestinian leaders expressed dismay at the U.S. objection to their effort to upgrade Palestine’s standing at the U.N. Their message was, roughly, “if we are unable to deliver some hope to our people via non-violent means, what alternative are you suggesting?”

The Region: Reality Hits Home

As we mark the second anniversary of the signing of the Abraham Accords and all eyes are on the exciting people-to-people, government-to-government, business, academic, scientific, and (albeit discreet) security cooperation it unleashed, few, including Israel, have paid notice to the challenges posed by the Accords.

A rare exception was the notes of caution expressed by the thoughtful Yousef al-Otaiba, the able UAE ambassador to the U.S. The diplomat, whose groundbreaking opinion piece in an Israeli Hebrew newspaper over two years ago presented Israelis with a choice between West Bank annexation and regional normalization, was again the first to challenge the conventional wisdom that normalization was immune to Israeli-Palestinian tensions. Speaking at the Atlantic Council on September 8, he—unprompted—repeatedly brought up the need for progress on the two-state solution, including when asked to enumerate the challenges to the normalization process. A few days later, while visiting Jerusalem, UAE Foreign Minister Sheikh Abdullah bin Zayed Al Nahyan also expressed his country’s wish to see progress toward an eventual two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.
Out of context, these statements might be taken for lip service. In context, they probably were not. The first major challenge to the initial conventional wisdom that normalization could be decoupled from Israeli-Palestinian violence came during the May 2021 11-day Gaza war. Then, senior officials from Accords signatories communicated their concerns to their U.S. and Israeli counterparts. Specifically, while acknowledging Israel’s right of self-defense, they urged Defense Minister Benny Gantz to factor the effect of the war and its broadcasted images on their ability to proceed with normalization as planned and to protect what had already been accomplished.

That message has since been repeatedly conveyed to Israeli leaders, including to Foreign Minister Yair Lapid by his regional counterparts during the first Negev Summit in March 2022, to then-Prime Minister Naftali Bennett when visiting Bahrain in February 2022. In the wake of the April 2022 Jerusalem violence, the UAE went even further, leveraging its U.N. Security Council seat in order to convene a special session on the subject.

**What to Do: The Arab Peace Initiative Is Key**

Whether it is eager to join or not, the PA’s exclusion from the Negev Forum, an official framework for regional cooperation created with the March 2022 summit of Accords signatories, Egypt, and the U.S., accentuates its isolation and helplessness. Likewise, Jordan’s participation is essential but seems to be conditioned on PA participation. Should the two be included going forward, they stand to benefit both separately and jointly, as do prospects for regional stability. Indeed, their inclusion can gradually help both reduce tensions (e.g. between the UAE and the PA) and enlist Negev Forum participants to support an Israeli-Palestinian process, however tentative. Still, for both to engage, a potent incentive and political cover are required.

Even in the wake of the Abraham Accords, Arab states—signatories included—have continued to express adherence to the spirit of the Arab Peace Initiative (API). This was certainly the case when, on September 20 during the U.N. General Assembly in New York, Saudi Arabia convened representatives of 25 countries and multilateral organizations (including the Arab League, the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, the U.N., and the EU) for a meeting designed to “relaunch the Arab Peace Initiative”.

Creating a platform for Negev Forum deliberations on the API that acknowledges the initiative’s significance would serve several objectives:

- Reviving the political horizon for two states, which is an urgent prerequisite for stabilizing the PA by restoring some of its credibility and legitimacy.
- Persuading both the PA and Jordan to join the Negev Forum.
- Encouraging the Negev Forum’s Arab members to engage in the Israeli-Palestinian process.
- Incentivizing other Arab states either to normalize ties with Israel or (as might be the case with the more cautious Saudi Arabia) to structure other pathways for normalization.

It is therefore proposed to explore the idea of creating a platform for amicable discussion of the API within the Negev Forum. Specifically:

The Negev Forum could serve as a channel for Israel to engage with Arab participants (and non-participants, possibly including Saudi nationals) on the subject of the API. This would allow Israel to
seek clarifications on specific aspects of the API and discuss its reservations.

With time, relevant scholars, including from non-Abraham Accords signatories (e.g. Saudi Arabia), may also accept invitations to engage in such discussions.

This process could enable all involved, including Israel, to express support for the API in individual and joint statements.

Ultimately, this dialogue could yield a dedicated API working group, whose mission would be to discuss how to operationalize the API and turn its vision into an action plan.

**The Elephant in the Room: Israeli Elections**

In his speech to the U.N. General Assembly on September 22, Prime Minister Yair Lapid made formal his support for the two-state solution. In addition, he has long emphasized the strategic importance of peace with Jordan and prioritized expanding the circle of Arab-Israeli normalization. With that in mind, he can be expected to be open to having the Negev Forum engage in API deliberations as suggested above. As the ‘father’ of the Negev Summit, he has already provided concrete evidence of his wish to see the Israeli-Palestinian issue included on its agenda when (still as a minister under Prime Minister Bennett) he had that notion incorporated into the concluding statement of the Negev steering committee meeting on June 27 in Bahrain.

Bringing the API into the Negev Forum might still be viable should the Israeli elections yield no option for coalition formation, thus providing Lapid with another term as caretaker prime minister. However, should a hard-right coalition be formed, the idea will inevitably be shelved, with the hope that this right-wing government’s conduct does not render it irrelevant even beyond its tenure.
A Palestinian Perspective

What’s in It for Us?

by Ibrahim Eid Dalalsha

When the Abraham Accords were first announced over two years ago, the Palestinian leadership strongly opposed them, describing them as a “stab in the back.” Subsequently, the PA failed to obtain a condemnation of the Accords from the Arab League, key players like Saudi Arabia and Egypt, or any other Arab state. With time, the Palestinian reaction became more muted, perhaps out of helplessness and a growing sense of marginalization. Indeed, a few months after the Accords were signed, the Palestinian leadership corrected its course of action and recommissioned the Palestinian ambassadors to Abu Dhabi and later to Manama. In addition, the PA was subsequently more careful and did not dismiss or comment publicly on the announcement of subsequent normalization agreements, including with Morocco and Sudan. Senior PA officials continued to criticize the Abraham Accords, privately warning that the Accords would totally undermine the Arab Peace Initiative, which called on Israel to end its occupation of territories it conquered from Arab states and resolve other issues, including the refugees, in exchange for normalized relations between Arab countries and Israel. According to this view, the Palestinian opposition to the Abraham Accords thus did not stem from ideological opposition to normalizing relations between Israel and the Arab countries, but mainly because the Accords wasted this leverage over Israel, a strategic political asset for the Palestinians. Furthermore, the official PA narrative points out that the signing of the Abraham Accords came without any serious consultations with the Palestinian leadership and against the backdrop of a Palestinian diplomatic boycott of the U.S. and poor relations between the UAE and the Palestinians. It is needless to say that the Palestinians also saw the Abraham Accords as a means of pressuring them to change their position toward the Trump Peace to Prosperity plan, which they had unequivocally rejected.
The Palestinian position on the Accords did not change, but they adapted their strategy by modifying their approach to rejecting them and changing their attitude towards the Arab countries who were involved in the Accords. The Palestinians believe that Saudi Arabia supported the Accords, despite not being a signatory or taking meaningful steps on its own toward normalization. Given that Saudi Arabia did not sign a similar agreement and remained committed to the Arab Peace Initiative, the Palestinians maintained their position calling for implementing the API and distancing themselves from the Abraham Accords and all relevant platforms, including the Negev Forum. In light of all these dynamics, the key question is what would prompt the PA to engage in a regional cooperation platform like the Negev Forum, and what could Israel and its regional partners do in order to make regional cooperation irresistible for the PA.

In a careful review of the PA’s various interests, the answer to this hypothetical question appears simple at first glance but political complications emerge when it is examined thoroughly. It is fair to assume that the PA’s main interest is to engage in a process that has a political framework to move regional political dynamics closer to the API’s stipulations to highlight the principle of two states in the normalization process, which thus far has largely avoided the Israeli Palestinian conflict. In addition, the financially challenged PA would have to pursue its economic interests strategically in order to boost its stature domestically and regionally. Small-scale projects or riding the coattails other players’ major projects are not sufficient to change course. It is noteworthy that Jordanian and Egyptian officials recently discussed separately with senior PA officials the prospects of PA engagement in regional cooperation activities such as the Negev Forum. According to senior PA officials, such engagement would only come about if a political platform advancing the two-state solution is secured, and if Palestinians stood to benefit through large-scale economic projects. In addition, those interested in Palestinian engagement in such a platform should take into account the need to address the strained relations between the Palestinian leadership, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE.

Then-Secretary of State John Kerry, King Abdullah II of Jordan, Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, and Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas in Sharm el-Sheikh, March 2015
It is clear that the outcome of the upcoming Israeli elections will determine whether such Palestinian conditions could plausibly be met. Assuming they could, the following proposed political and economic frameworks could attract Palestinians to engage actively:

The Palestinians would have a hard time opposing any regional forum that declares a commitment to pursuing a peaceful resolution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict on the basis of the API. Short of a clear-cut reference to the API, the Palestinians would probably endorse an invite to join a regional forum that seeks a ‘peaceful resolution to the conflict on the basis of a two-state solution on the 1967 lines with mutual and agreed-upon land swaps.’ It is also important to offer the PA certain practical incentives. These could include (under a centrist Israeli government) a mutual cessation of all unilateral actions. Such a scenario envisions Israel committing to start talks while both sides stop unilateral actions throughout the talks’ duration. This process would also see the gradual implementation of meaningful steps to meet other PA demands, such as transferring control of certain parts of Areas B and C to full PA control and actively working to de-escalate the situation on Haram al-Sharif by affirming and maintaining the status quo that existed before the year 2000. This means allowing the Waqf to take control of coordinating the visits of non-Muslims with the Israeli police. In addition, the Palestinians could take steps in response to a series of demands that Israel and other players have persistently been pushing in the past few years. This includes improving security performance and tightening security coordination, reviewing laws related to prisoner payments, and freezing all actions at international courts and organizations.

On a parallel track, it is important to create an economic incentive for the PA that can’t be rejected. A longstanding Palestinian demand has been to allow the building of luxurious hotels on the West Bank beachside of the Dead Sea. This large-scale tourism project was discussed with the Benjamin Netanyahu government in the past, but was turned down outright. Other feasible projects could include creating a new airstrip in the Jordan Valley that Palestinians could use to travel abroad. While much would be left for discussion in the regional forum and its subcommittees, the PA would want to benefit from free trade agreements in the region and beyond.

In conclusion, it is not impossible to bring the Palestinians into a regional cooperation forum, provided the right political terms are set and large-scale economic interests are met. The question remains, however, whether there will be enough political momentum in Israel and whether the U.S. will push such an agenda forward. Otherwise, the regional cooperation forum will mostly likely take normalizing Arab countries and Israel to new horizons away from the increasingly unstable Palestinian Authority. Even so, they will inevitably always have to face the ebbs and flows of Israeli-Palestinian tensions.
An Egyptian Perspective

The Necessary Steps to Leverage Normalization Agreements to Advance Israeli-Palestinian Peace

by Hesham Youssef

One of the main questions that were asked when the Abraham Accords and other normalization agreements were reached two years ago—a question still being asked today—is whether these new relations would constitute a bridge to advance prospects for Israeli-Palestinian peace or a bypass around a political resolution of this conflict. So far, they have been a bypass, but efforts are ongoing to transform them into a bridge.

The UAE has repeatedly indicated that its normalization with Israel saved the two-state solution, as it was predicated on Israel suspending annexation plans. While it is questionable if annexation would have happened anyway (opposition to the move was considerable on both the far right and the left in Israel), former President Trump set the issue to rest; when Israel and the UAE agreed to ties, he declared that annexation was off the table for now. It is meaningful that the UAE linked normalization to the conflict. This was not the case with Bahrain, Morocco, and Sudan.

What Are the Obstacles to Leveraging the Normalization Agreements to Advance Israeli-Palestinian Peace?

There are five main challenges facing the effort to leverage the normalization agreements to advance peace.

First, on the Israeli side, the difficulty is that Benjamin Netanyahu, the prime minister of Israel when the Abraham Accords were announced, repeatedly argued that the Accords represented “peace for peace” and that Israel did not make any concessions. This is not entirely true. As mentioned, annexation was suspended, and a huge portion of the price was paid by the U.S. The UAE linked normalization to suspending annexation, but it also received several promises pertaining to bilateral relations with the U.S. The UAE felt that this was an important insurance policy to advance its strategic relations with the U.S., regardless of the outcome of the 2020 U.S. elections; its assessment proved correct. Aside from Bahrain, which did not have any demands, this dynamic also applied to the other normalization agreements. Morocco resumed ties with Israel in return for having the U.S. recognize Moroccan sovereignty over Western Sahara, and Sudan announced its intention to normalize with Israel in return for being removed from the U.S. State Sponsors of Terrorism list.
Ultimately, there was little political will to link normalization to advancing Israeli-Palestinian peace, and the framing by Netanyahu made it difficult for the new Israeli government of Naftali Bennett and Yair Lapid, which came to power in June 2021, to provide concessions in return for additional normalization steps.

Second, the Palestinians were taken by surprise, and reacted harshly against the UAE. This took place in the context of already tense Emirati-Palestinian relations, which continue to be tense today. The reason for the Palestinian anger is multifold. They were not consulted or even informed when the UAE decided to normalize ties with Israel, but they knew that this was not something that they would have accepted anyway. They are also fearful that it could lead to a domino effect of other Arab states embracing normalization. For that reason, they are concerned that it could lead to the unraveling of the Arab Peace Initiative (API), which they consider the basis for a final settlement. Finally, they are unwilling to admit, even to themselves, how much things have changed since the Arab world took steps against Egypt when it decided to pursue peace with Israel in 1977—steps that included moving the Arab League from Cairo to Tunisia and the severing of diplomatic ties with Egypt by almost all Arab countries.

Third, the Biden administration has been advocating for Arab, African, and Islamic countries to pursue normalization with Israel. However, Biden is unwilling to follow in the footsteps of the previous administration by paying the price of new normalization deals. At the same time, he was not willing to pressure Bennett and Lapid’s fragile, broad coalition that was established after the last Israeli election to provide meaningful concessions to the Palestinians, as he felt that that could lead to its collapse, which inevitably happened regardless. Despite successive administrations claiming that Arab-Israeli normalization would advance prospects for Israeli-Palestinian peace, today this outcome has not materialized.

Fourth, the political will of the normalizing countries is also a challenge. The UAE felt that suspending annexation is all that it was willing to do, and that any additional steps could not take place without a genuine effort by the Palestinian leadership to mend fences. Morocco and Sudan probably felt that putting conditions on Israel might derail their deal with the U.S. Finally, the approach by several Western countries arguing that the train has left the station and it is up to the Palestinians to catch up is also counterproductive. Palestinians are not willing to become an afterthought. Including elements on the agenda of the Negev Forum to improve living conditions for Palestinians is totally inadequate. There are certain non-negotiables the Palestinians require in order to change their attitude toward the whole approach. The multilateral track in the Madrid Peace Process included an element of gradual normalization, but the whole process revolved around resolving the Arab-Israeli conflict; without a clear path toward advancing the two-state solution, it is very difficult for the Palestinians to accept this approach.
What Can Be Done?

Despite these challenges, it is possible to leverage normalization agreements to advance prospects for peace. The question now is what can be done by the parties and stakeholders to achieve this objective.

There is no doubt that from the perspective of Israel, the UAE, Bahrain, and Morocco, the normalization agreements have advanced their interests. Sudan is preoccupied with numerous internal issues and relations with Israel have advanced at a far slower pace. There is ample proof that these relations are steadily advancing in important areas. Shifting Israel from the U.S. European Command to Central Command (CENTCOM) allowed security cooperation to advance in a discreet manner. No details were released, for example, about the Middle East Air Defense Alliance that Israel claims started in 2015 and that Israeli Defense Minister Benny Gantz argued is already “thwarting Iranian attempts” to target the region.

On the Israeli front, much will depend on the outcome of the upcoming elections in November. The potential that it could result in a swing to the far right would make positive change extremely difficult. The shadow of Netanyahu and an approach based on “peace for peace” and galloping annexation is a recipe for further tension and escalation. A broader, more balanced coalition may provide some hope through the recognition that there is a need for a process based on mutual concessions to advance peace. Israel needs to recognize that the ceiling facing Arab countries in advancing normalization can be elevated as progress is achieved towards peace. The new normalization agreements provide proof
that Israel is accepted and will be integrated and welcomed in the region in the context of peace.

The Palestinians need to get their act together. The popularity of the Palestinian Authority is at an all-time low. The leadership needs to work on reconciliation, good governance, and elections. Furthermore, it should work on ameliorating its relations, particularly with Saudi Arabia and the UAE, and must provide a vision and engage in a manner that inspires its own people and the international community, which is preoccupied with other pressing priorities.

Recognizing that the U.S. is not willing to expend any significant political capital, the administration still needs to work harder on several fronts after the midterm congressional elections and the elections in Israel. The level of ambition to do so within the administration is quite modest, but even so, several small steps could serve as a meaningful start. First, the U.S. should translate its policy statements into action plans, including that both sides “deserve equal measures of security, freedom, opportunity, and dignity” and Biden’s statement that “we cannot wait for a peace agreement to be reached or for every issue to be resolved to deliver on the needs of the Palestinian people that exist today.” Second, the U.S. should continue to ensure that irreversible steps like building settlements in E1 are completely shelved. Third, the U.S. should encourage normalizing countries to link future normalization steps with steps to advance peace.

The normalizing countries are yet to demonstrate the political will to use normalization steps as leverage to advance prospects for peace. However, they need to recognize what a poll by the Washington Institute showed: that 45% of Bahrainis polled held very or somewhat positive views of the Abraham Accords in November 2020, and that this support eroded to 20% by March 2022. The 49% of Emiratis that disapproved of the agreement in 2020 has grown to over two-thirds, and according to the Arab Barometer, only 31% of Moroccans polled support normalization. Recurrent tensions, particularly in Jerusalem and military attacks on Gaza, more than likely contributed to this large decline.

Furthermore, after the signing of the Abraham Accords, there was an expectation that other Arab and Islamic countries would soon follow suit. Even Oman and Qatar, which have long maintained contacts...
with Israel, refused to join. The Saudis have been willing to take modest steps, like permitting Israeli overflights of its airspace, but continue to stress their unwavering adherence to the API and an insistence that normalization will come at the end of the process, not at the beginning.

There is an important role to be played by Egypt and Jordan in advancing Palestinian reconciliation, assisting Palestinians in formulating a vision for their future, and reconciling Palestinian relations with both the Saudi and the Emirati leadership.

National interests will remain paramount. However, this does not mean that the Arab public opinion is willing to forgo the necessity of resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The risk is that escalation, particularly in Jerusalem, and the absence of progress will negatively affect normalization, similar to the decline that was witnessed after the breakdown of the Madrid multilateral process. Transforming normalization agreements into a bridge rather than a bypass can be instrumental in advancing the prospects of peace, and this remains a collective responsibility of all those interested in advancing peace and stability in the Middle East.
A Jordanian Perspective

Kosherize the Accords

by Farah Bdour

When the Abraham Accords were first announced in 2020, Jordanians viewed it with deep concern, since normalizing relations with Israel was no longer preconditioned on achieving progress on the Palestinian track as embodied by the API. Jordanian concerns stemmed from a conviction that the Palestinian issue could not be decentralized from the Middle East turbulence, nor decoupled from internal dynamics. Jordan’s foreign minister explicitly articulated his country’s position toward the accords by saying, “If Israel sees the agreement as an incentive for the end of the occupation and the return of the Palestinian people’s right to freedom and to establish their independent state on the 1967 borders with Eastern Jerusalem as its capital, the region will move towards a just peace. However, if Israel does not do this, the conflict will deepen and threaten the whole region.”

On and off the record, Jordanian security experts have shared that the persistence of occupation legitimizes and bolsters support for terrorist groups in local communities around the world, consequently jeopardizing counterterrorism intelligence crucial for penetrating these groups and halting attacks against Jordan and its allies. They have also pointed out that the Palestinian issue has been weaved into the terrorists’ narrative targeting the young and frustrated. Throughout the years, Jordan has witnessed a number of painful attacks in Amman, Karak, Fuhais, Rukban, and Ein al-Basha, where Palestine was part of the recruitment appeal. With the announcement of the Abraham Accords, these experts have expressed fear that terrorist groups would leverage grassroots resentment of the accords to expand recruitment and establish a foothold in critical locations. The recent attacks in the Nagab (Negev) and Hadera by ISIS affiliates are viewed through that lens. Adding ISIS to Jordan’s western borders is a scenario that will put great pressure on the Jordanian security forces, who are already dealing with attacks by militias linked to Iran on the northern front. The scenario could be exacerbated by reviving a Sunni-Shi’a axis between these terrorist groups. This dark scenario has propelled many experts to reevaluate Jordan’s engagement policy with the dominant Palestinian party on the ground.

There were also concerns that the sole mission of the Abraham Accords was to forge a new anti-Iran alliance. Reorganizing Israel within the area of responsibility of U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM) alongside the other Middle Eastern nations reinforced this notion. With this move, Jordan feared that the region would witness more polarization and be plunged into militarized competition, where Iran would likely be pushed to adopt even more aggressive policies using its regional proxies. In such
a scenario, the coordination and cooperation between Israel and Arab states would rise to a whole different level, stripping Jordan of its Arab strategic depth and providing Israel with the opportunity to liquidate two final status issues: borders, by annexing Palestinian territories that would kill the two-state solution threatening to transform Jordan into an alternative homeland for the Palestinians; and Jerusalem, by marginalizing the Hashemite custodianship, a role that has been contested by Saudi Arabia.

On the other hand, the growing perception that Arab states have bypassed the Palestinian issue has validated the Israel boycott movement’s rhetoric that Israel is being rewarded for violating human rights in the occupied territories. As a result, public opinion grew more hostile to Israel and is incapable of making a distinction between strategic economic projects that aim to promote favorable conditions for confidence-building between Palestinians and Israelis, and other projects that operate in isolation from the Palestinian issue. The inability to make such a distinction has lumped Jordan under the second category and deprived it of the opportunity to harness powerful tools that strengthen Palestinian state-building and create an environment conducive to resuming peace talks. When the Negev Summit was held with the participation of UAE, Bahrain, Egypt, and Morocco, King Abdullah sent a loud and clear message while visiting Ramallah that the Palestinian issue won’t be bypassed. In countries like Jordan, where public opinion matters, this message was extremely important.

Now, two years after the Accords, a number of significant developments have provided a clearer picture for Jordan to navigate its concerns and modify its policy toward the Abraham Accords. First, even if the motives behind signing the Abraham Accords were not centered around Palestinian aspirations, there are limits to how far Arab states are willing or able to ignore it, as there is a certain level of commitment to the Palestinian issue they are not prepared to forsake, regardless of who is leading the government on the Israeli side. When the Arab League rejected the Palestinian demand
that they condemn the Israel-UAE deal, and later a number of Arab countries followed the UAE’s lead with the Saudi ‘big brother’ implicitly endorsing it and opening its airspace for Israeli airlines, the Arabs were sending a message that they too have pressing national interests that need to be addressed. Nevertheless, when Israel announced its plan to annex the Jordan Valley in 2020 and violence erupted in Jerusalem in May 2021, the UAE threatened Israel with “it’s either annexation or normalization” and voiced a sharp objection toward Israel’s conduct. During the recent Jeddah summit, Arab leaders reaffirmed their support for the Palestinian people and the two-state solution, and during the Negev Forum’s meeting in Manama, they affirmed that the relations between signatories “can be harnessed to create momentum in Israeli-Palestinian relations, towards a negotiated resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and as part of efforts to achieve a just, lasting, and comprehensive peace.” Even with less substantial matters, Morocco had major role in negotiating the 24/7 opening of the Allenby Bridge during the recent crisis at the border crossing, to ease the movement of Palestinian travelers.

Second, the Accords are no longer exclusively conceived as an anti-Iran alliance. Each of the Arab states that attended the Negev summit had a different priority. At the Negev Forum in Bahrain, these priorities were reflected in the formation of working groups that deal with six main issues: clean energy, education and coexistence, food and water security, health, regional security, and tourism. The Iranian issue was not discussed during the forum. Moreover, when looking into details, the signatories of the Accords differ in their approach towards Iran. After Biden’s Middle East tour resulted in the signing of a security agreement between the U.S. and Israel in which the U.S. committed to the use of force as a “last resort,” Abu Dhabi responded by saying that the UAE will not be part of any group that sees confrontation as a direction, although the UAE does see serious problems with Iran and its regional policy that they hope to resolve through diplomacy. The UAE’s strategic shift towards Iran reflects that the UAE is adopting a de-escalation policy that is “wise and necessary,” which Jordan sees as a favorable strategy for approaching conflicts in the Middle East. In his interview with CNBC, King Abdullah alluded to the potential of regional projects to change the behavior of players like Iran and the possibility of creating incentives to reap benefits from regional cooperation. He also referred to a new vibe in the region of regional partners coming to the realization that helping each other is necessary to address the region’s complex challenges.

Within this context, Jordan’s position toward the Accords must take a new outlook. Rather than viewing the Accords as a concern, they should be seen as an opportunity. However, there is nothing that characterizes the Middle East more than being the region where all opportunities wither. The main challenge Jordan will face is the fact that there is no cohesive strategy on a regional (nor international)
level to end the occupation and establish the Palestinian state on the 1967 lines. There are also no political conditions imposed on Israel or the Palestinians to comply with the two-state vision. Given the lack of a coherent strategy and the absence of political conditioning, it’s difficult to answer the following questions: How will the Abraham Accords be leveraged for progress on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict? How will the Abraham Accords be used to build confidence across the region with the purpose of accelerating the ripening of an environment conducive to resume peace talks?

Ideally, the formation of a regional security architecture to create a coherent strategy to end the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in addition to addressing the region’s pressing security needs would be the right path forward. In Article 4 of their 1994 peace treaty, both Jordan and Israel committed to the creation of a “Conference on Security and Cooperation in the Middle East” along the lines of the Helsinki process. In October 2021, the Economic Cooperation Foundation and the Amman Center for Peace and Development produced a detailed study advocating for the creation of a modified model based on the OSCE that comprises three baskets: political/security, environmental/economic, and human rights. However, since domestic political and economic priorities tend to overrule countries’ commitments to regional structuring, the second-best option is to leverage the Abraham Accords and other existing political and economic mechanisms to develop a realistic roadmap linked to political deliverables that prioritizes the incremental reversal of realities on the ground. The objectives of this road map would be to reviwe a political horizon, build trust, shift people’s perception, and gradually accelerate the ripening of an environment conducive to resume peace talks.

The practical manifestation would be adding an API working group to the six working groups formed already, with the goal of kosherizing the Accords and giving signatories a platform to act on their commitment to the spirit of the API. Forming this group would also provide an incentive and political cover for both Jordan and Palestine to join, who could serve as chairs for this working group. Once the incentive has been provided, Jordan could play a vital role in developing a common understanding on the scope of ignoring or decentralizing the Israeli-Palestinian issue in the region’s security outlook, building consensus around a realistic regional roadmap to reverse facts on the ground, and working on “mainstreaming” the Palestinian issue across the six working groups. Jordan can start by mapping all existing political and economic mechanisms, in order to assess their potential to contribute to achieving the political deliverables and to determine the timeline for doing so.
For working groups that deal with clean energy, food and water security, health, and tourism, political deliverables could take the form of constructing regional research centers in Area C of the West Bank, building economic corridors to remove physical barriers to create Palestinian territorial continuity and facilitate Palestinian regional integration. It also could mean opening the Palestinian Chamber of Commerce, Arab trade offices in East Jerusalem, or creating a regional fund to facilitate the relocation of settlers. When it comes to tourism, ethics-centered, youth-targeted planning should be at the forefront of initiatives in this sector, such as facilitating narrative-based and pro-justice tourism in the occupied territories and around the region where Jews were uprooted. In the field of education and coexistence (a term that should be replaced by co-living, co-resistance, shared reality, or shared future), there is a crucial need to form a regional educational body that opens dialogue between educational actors, NGOs, companies, and innovators across the Middle East to promote inclusive education and opportunities prioritizing Palestinian children in Israeli detention.

Jordan’s presence in the various regional mechanisms like the Arab Quartet, the Organization for Islamic Cooperation, Munich Quartet, the Ad Hoc Liaison Committee (AHLC), and Union of the Mediterranean makes it a natural candidate to enrich the proposed API working group and ensure its impact. Moreover, Jordan’s membership in various bilateral and trilateral economic cooperation mechanisms puts it in a good position to use regional resilient packs to increase Palestinians’ trade integration and connectivity and enhance their economic reality. The fact that the Palestinians will be part of a web of economic mechanisms means that they will diversify their dependence and partially address the power asymmetry with Israel, allowing them to navigate likely political upheavals and changes in Israeli government. On the other hand, the recent relaunching of the API and the seven-year MoU signed between Jordan and the United States with more than $1.45 billion in annual aid offer a good opportunity to act upon a regional roadmap that would gradually accelerate the ripening of an environment conducive to resuming peace talks.
About the Authors

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