

Fall 2024 - Marcellus Policy Analysis

The Abraham Accords and the Peace Mirage: Analyzing the Failure of Gulf-Israeli Normalization as a Framework for Regional Peace

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The United States has invested significant political capital in its attempt to normalize relations between Israel and its Arab neighbors. Two subsequent administrations have made the Abraham Accords their signature foreign policy in the Middle East. President Donald Trump, with his knack for deal-making, has managed to strike normalization agreements with Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Sudan, and Morocco. However, despite the President's repeated remarks that he brought peace to the Middle East, the fact of the matter is none of the signatories of the Abraham Accords are in conflict with Israel. The Trump Administration has achieved the aforementioned normalization agreements by entirely circumventing the central issue of the region, which is the lack of Palestinian statehood.

One could blame President Trump's failure to address the central issue of the region on his lack of foreign policy experience. However, when President Joe Biden took office, he picked up where the Trump Administration left off despite having a much more experienced foreign policy cabinet. President Biden has made normalization of relations between Israel and Saudi Arabia a cornerstone of his foreign policy agenda, investing significant resources and political capital. His Administration prepared to make significant security commitments to Saudi Arabia to entice the kingdom to normalize relations with Israel, and a mutual defense pact was floated as an incentive.

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This paper outlines multiple reasons why normalization fails as a framework for lasting regional peace in the Middle East. The Abraham Accords are fragile due to a lack of popular legitimacy, as evidenced by public opinion data that showcase how the autocratic regimes signing up for normalization do not reflect the sentiment of the general population. If social unrest washes over Arab countries again, the agreements will be null and void as they are not backed by popular legitimacy. The Hamas attack on Israel of October 7, 2023, has completely changed the regional calculus as Saudi Arabia and other Arab states are hesitant to normalize relations with Israel due to internal pressure. In addition to the lack of popular legitimacy, the focus on normalization that persisted across both the Trump and Biden administrations is built on the false assumption that Gulf states share the same stringent hostility towards Iran as the United States and Israel. The recent rapprochement efforts between Gulf countries and Iran prove these assumptions false. This paper also examines the downsides of a security pact with Saudi Arabia and its negative repercussions on the US's effort to pivot to Asia.

Background

On August 13, 2020, President Donald Trump took to his preferred social media platform and tweeted, "HUGE breakthrough today! Historic Peace Agreement between our two GREAT friends, Israel and the United Arab Emirates!"¹ The day was indeed historic as it would be the first time Israel had normalized ties with an Arab state in more than twenty-five years.² Bahrain followed the UAE's footsteps, officially normalizing ties with Israel. On September 15, 2020, at a White House signing event hosted by President Trump and attended by Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, Bahraini Foreign Minister Abdullatif bin Rashid Al Zayani and Emirati Foreign Minister Abdullah bin Zayed Al Nahyan, President Trump commented, "They are choosing a future in which Arabs and Israelis, Muslims, Jews, and Christians, can live together, pray together and dream together side by side in harmony, community and peace."³

The openness of Gulf states to normalizing relations with Israel resulted from the emergence of a new

generation of leaders in Bahrain and the UAE who were less committed to the ideals of pan-Arab nationalism than their predecessors.⁴ After the death of Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan, the founder of the UAE and a staunch advocate of pan-Arabism and sympathetic to the Palestinian struggle, his son, Mohamed Bin Zayed (MBZ), was elevated to the role of the crown prince of Abu Dhabi.⁵ MBZ was part of a new generation of Western-educated Gulf leaders, as the crown prince received his military education at the prestigious Royal Military Academy Sandhurst in the United Kingdom.⁶ After the death of his brother Khalifa bin Zayed Al Nahyan at age 73, MBZ was elected president of the UAE in 2022 and pursued an aggressive foreign policy against Iran's influence in the region, which brought him closer to the United States and Israel.⁷

A similar changing of the guard occurred in Bahrain when, after the death of Sheik Isa bin Salman Al Khalifa in 1999 from a heart attack, his son Sheik Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa assumed power.⁸ The western-educated Hamad received his military education in the United Kingdom, attending the Mons Officer Cadet School.⁹ The new king adopted a pro-Western foreign policy approach and sought a closer relationship with the United States.¹⁰ His son and current crown prince, Salman Bin Hamad Al Khalifa, followed his father's footsteps and received a Western education. The crown prince attended American University in Washington, DC, and graduated with a BA in public administration.¹¹ The crown prince would also adopt his father's foreign policy by seeking closer ties with the West.

A History of Cooperation

The Trump Administration framed the normalization of ties between the UAE and Israel as a peace deal. However, the two countries were not in conflict; as a matter of fact, they enjoyed a history of economic and military cooperation, and the signing of the accords was a mere formality. Cooperation between the two countries started shortly after the Oslo Accords, when Israel facilitated the shipment of advanced fighter jets to the UAE. During President Bill Clinton's term, the UAE relayed to the United States its desire to purchase advanced F-16 fighter jets. The Clinton Administration initially blocked the sale as it adhered to a long-established doctrine ensuring that Israel

maintains a qualitative military edge in the region, and the sale of F-16 fighter jets to the UAE would have risked shaking the delicate regional military balance. The Clinton Administration relayed the UAE's request to Jeremy Issacharoff, an Israeli diplomat working out of its embassy in Washington, who requested a meeting with the Emiratis to discuss the issue directly. During the meeting, Emirati and Israeli officials found common ground regarding the emerging threat from Iran. After the conclusion of the meeting, Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin informed the Clinton Administration that he wasn't opposed to selling F-16 fighter jets to the UAE as he saw it as a long-term investment to build trust between Israel and the UAE.¹²

The UAE and Israel have a long history of collaboration in the technology sector. In 2009, the UAE signed a 20-million-dollar deal with ImageSat International, an Israeli satellite company. The agreement provided the UAE with data from the Eros-A satellite.¹³ The two countries have also cooperated on spyware technology. A 2022 New York Times investigation revealed that in 2013, Israel authorized the sale of Pegasus, a powerful spyware made by Israeli tech firm NSO Group.¹⁴ The UAE has used the spyware program against dissidents and human rights activists. An investigation by Citizen Lab revealed that Ahmed Mansoor, a renowned Emirati human rights defender, was targeted by Pegasus in 2016.¹⁵

Like the UAE, Bahrain made numerous friendly overtures to Israel before formally normalizing ties under the Trump Administration. In 2005, after signing a free trade agreement with the United States, Bahrain ended its ban on importing Israeli goods.¹⁶ In 2009, Crown Prince Salman published an op-ed in *The Washington Post* calling for dialogue between Arabs and Israelis. He noted, "We must stop the small-minded waiting game in which each side refuses to budge until the other side makes the first move. We've got to be bigger than that. All sides need to take simultaneous, good-faith action if peace is to have a chance. A real, lasting peace requires comprehensive engagement and reconciliation at the human level."¹⁷ Furthermore, on February 15, 2005, during a meeting with U.S. Ambassador to Bahrain William Monroe, King Hamad ibn Isa Al Khalifa revealed to the U.S. ambassador that "he had instructed his public

information minister to stop referring to Israel in official statements of the kingdom as the "enemy" or the "Zionist entity." Details of the secret meeting were revealed in 2011 when WikiLeaks released a trove of documents.¹⁸

The Fragility of the Abraham Accords

The Abraham Accords are not a viable, lasting peace framework for the Middle East due to their fragility caused by a lack of popular legitimacy. This is evident by the contrast between how the Abraham Accords are advertised to a Western audience compared to their Middle Eastern counterpart. On the campaign trail, President Trump characterized the Abraham Accords as peace deals in the following remark: "With the historic Abraham Accords, I even made peace in the Middle East, we're gonna have peace in the Middle East."¹⁹ In contrast, when examining the Arabic press releases that Gulf monarchies made after the signing of the normalization agreements, the word "peace" is rarely used; instead, the accords are largely sold to their domestic population as free trade agreements with Israel. The contrast in messaging is due to the overwhelming opposition to the normalization of ties with Israel among the population of Gulf countries, as indicated by multiple opinion polls and protests.

Analyzing Opinion Polls

According to the 2022 Arab Opinion Index published by the Arab Center in Washington DC, the overwhelming majority of respondents (84%) disapproved of their countries' recognition of Israel, with only (8%) accepting the prospect of formal diplomatic recognition.²⁰ Examining opinion polls in Gulf countries that have normalized relations with Israel does not paint a different picture. Only 27 percent of respondents in the UAE and 20 percent in Bahrain viewed the Abraham Accords positively.²¹ As evidenced by the opinion polls, the Abraham Accords lack popular legitimacy due to overwhelming opposition from Gulf citizens.

Domestic Opposition in Bahrain

In the lead-up to normalization, Bahrain's government announced new regulations cracking down on criticism of state policy in anticipation of public

outrage. In May 2019, Bahraini citizens received an SMS message on their phones from the Ministry of Interior warning them against following “inciteful” accounts on social media. The message read, “ Be careful, fellow citizen and resident: those who follow accounts which incite sedition will be prosecuted.”²² The SMS messages preceded a tweet from the Ministry of Interior’s official Twitter account stating that, “ those who follow inciting accounts that promote sedition and circulate their posts will be held legally accountable.”²³ Since the Arab Spring showcased the organizational power of social media, Arab governments have been sensitive to any form of dissent on social media platforms and wary of opposition accounts that share their views from exile. In April 2019, online activists forced an incoming thirty-member Israeli delegation to cancel their plans to attend a government-sponsored entrepreneurship conference in Manama. The delegation comprised Israeli business executives and government officials who had intended to participate in a conference organized by the U.S.-based Global Entrepreneurship Network (GEN). The online campaign garnered support from several members of the parliament before it escalated into street protests, forcing the cancellation. Bahrain’s parliament condemned the visit, issuing the following statement: “Bahrain’s parliament announces that the people of Bahrain rejects any Israeli presence on its territory and its lands, and any decision allowing this presence is unacceptable.”²⁴

Bahrain’s government continued its crackdown on dissent by criminalizing pro-Palestinian activism in the country. In May 2020, the government ordered the shutdown of an online event organized by the Bahraini Democratic Youth Society.²⁵ During the live stream, Hadeel Kamal Eddin, who was moderating the discussion, interrupted one of the speakers, noting that she had received a phone call from government officials asking her to cancel the event. The government’s reasoning behind the cancellation was that the group hadn’t obtained the required permits before the event’s launch. However, Ibrahim Kamal Eddin, the president of Bahrain’s chapter of the pro-Palestine Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) movement and one of the participating speakers, said that they had previously held multiple meetings to discuss the Palestinian issue and the topic of normalization without needing to acquire a permit beforehand.²⁶ The new restriction on speech

concerning the Palestinian issue was part of a larger push by the Bahraini government to distance itself away from the issue as it sought closer relations with Israel.

Backlash Against the UAE’s Decision to Normalize

The UAE’s decision to normalize relations with Israel elicited protests across the Gulf, as activists voiced their frustrations with what they saw as a betrayal of the Palestinian cause. Bahrain’s Democratic Youth Society was at the forefront of the protests, signing the first petition denouncing the move and calling on the UAE to reverse course because the move did not reflect the will of Emiratis. The statement noted: “We believe that [national decisions should] reflect the principles and values of civil society, and there should be no disparate from this regardless of circumstances of external pressure. The people of Bahrain stand firm against normalization of any kind with the Zionist entity that occupies the historic land of Palestine.”²⁷ The petition’s signatories included groups with a wide spectrum of political views. Leftist groups such as the General Federation of Bahrain Trade Unions joined forces with the al-Menbare Islamic Society, an organization affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood.²⁸

The reaction to normalization inside the UAE was more muted due to the country’s strict laws on freedom of speech. Abdulkhaleq Abdulla, a prominent political science professor based in Dubai with more than 350,000 Twitter followers, tweeted a crying emoji on the day normalization was announced.²⁹ The professor’s subdued response could be explained by his desire to avoid being detained again after he was arrested for ten days in 2017 by authorities in the UAE for tweets he made regarding freedom of speech.³⁰ Some activists displayed more overt disapproval of normalization; six Emirati activists established a new organization called the Emirates Union to Resist Normalization with the stated aim of raising awareness regarding the danger of normalization and describing it as “ a historical betrayal by the UAE rulers” and calling for its reversal.³¹ The group noted that most dissidents are afraid to speak out against normalization out of fear of criminal punishments, which could include up to ten years of imprisonment.³² Hamad al-Shamsi, one of the organization’s founding members, was sentenced to fifteen years in prison on national

security-related charges by the federal supreme court in Abu Dhabi.³³ Shortly after the announcement of normalization, he tweeted the following from exile: “The Emirati normalization with the [Z]ionist entity would not have been possible without Abu Dhabi first shackling its society with laws that criminalize freedom of speech and treat dissent as a breach of security. We have reached a point where our society cannot even condemn this betrayal.”³⁴

Egyptian-Israeli Relations During Morsi’s Presidency

Due to the lack of popular support in the Gulf region for normalizing relations with Israel, the possibility of a popular uprising would void the present normalization agreements, as a democratic government would be less likely to sign up for an agreement that goes against the overwhelming popular sentiment. Egypt during Mohamed Morsi’s presidency offers an excellent case study of how the relationship between Israel and the Gulf states could change if social upheaval causes the collapse of the present monarchical regimes, giving way to democratic governance. President Morsi was elected in 2012 after Egypt held the only democratic presidential election in its history.³⁵

In his short stint as president, Morsi brought the Palestinian issue to the forefront of his foreign policy agenda. He ordered Egyptian authorities to permanently open the Rafah crossing, easing the siege imposed on Gaza by Israel, who have long coordinated the movement of people and goods through the crossing with Egyptian authorities under Hosni Mubarak’s reign.³⁶ When a flare-up of hostilities occurred in the Gaza Strip between Israel and Hamas during his presidency, the Egyptian president denounced the attacks and labeled them as “a blatant aggression against Humanity.”³⁷ During a speech made after the Friday prayer at a Cairo mosque, Morsi signaled to Israel and his support base that his policy towards the Palestinians would widely differ from his predecessor. He said, “I tell them in the name of all the Egyptian people that the Egypt of today is not the Egypt of yesterday and that the Arabs of today are different than the Arabs of yesterday.”³⁸ The change in policy and rhetoric under Morsi’s presidency reflected the opinion of the majority of Egyptians who sympathized with Palestinians and their struggle for

statehood.³⁹

The Arab Spring in Egypt reshaped the country’s foreign policy towards Israel by aligning it with the opinion of most Egyptians. Social upheaval in Gulf states could bring on a similar change as the friendly status quo between them and Israel relies on the continued existence of autocratic regimes who, due to the nature of their governance, are at risk of arousing popular anger leading to their ousting.

Rapprochement with Iran

Curbing Iran’s influence in the region is often touted as the *raison d’etre* for Gulf states’ seeking normalization with Israel. However, Gulf monarchies are less stringent in their hostility toward Iran than the United States and Israel. Gulf monarchies are more concerned with ensuring the survival of their regimes and are open to rapprochement with Iran to achieve that goal. Shifting away from looking at the normalization agreements through a narrow balance of power lens to a more holistic regime survival lens helps explain the recent attempts at rapprochement between Iran and some of the Gulf monarchies.

Saudi Arabia

On March 10, 2023, Saudi Arabia and Iran normalized ties in a deal brokered by the People’s Republic of China (PRC).⁴⁰ The normalization came as a shock to many foreign policy analysts who saw the relationship between the two countries as unrepealable, especially after the 2016 attack on the Saudi embassy in Iran, which was prompted by the execution of a prominent Shia cleric in Saudi Arabia.⁴¹ The normalization of ties brought on a shift in tone from Saudi Crown Prince Mohamed Bin Salman (MBS). During the Islamic Summit hosted in Riyadh, the crown prince decried Israel’s recent attacks on Iran and called for the international community to compel Israel “to respect the sovereignty of the sisterly Islamic Republic of Iran and not to violate its lands.”⁴² His recent comments stood in contrast to his more hostile rhetoric against Iran. During a 2017 interview with MBC Television, the crown prince characterized the Iranian regime as “a regime built on an extremist ideology ... which [says] they must control the land of Muslims and spread their Twelver Jaafari sect in the Muslim world.”⁴³ The improved relations aren’t just marked

by the lessening of hostile rhetoric but by increased military cooperation between Iran and Saudi Arabia. On October 23, 2024, the two countries held joint military exercises in the Sea of Oman, and the chief of the Saudi armed forces met his Iranian counterpart, General Mohammad Bagheri, in Tehran to discuss opportunities for military cooperation between the two countries.⁴⁴

UAE

The United Arab Emirates has also made several friendly overtures to Tehran with the objective of reducing regional tensions. In 2022, the UAE reinstated its ambassador to Iran six years after downgrading its ties with Tehran in a show of support for Saudi Arabia after the storming of its embassy in 2016.⁴⁵ Commenting on the normalization of ties, Anwar Gargash, a diplomatic advisor to the United Arab Emirates, described Iran as a neighbor and emphasized that “the way is not confrontation because confrontation will complicate the regional scene as a whole.”⁴⁶ In more recent signs of improvement in relations between the two countries, the president of the United Arab Emirates, Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed, met former Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian in 2023 and discussed “the importance of building on positive developments to benefit the people of the region and enhance regional stability and prosperity.”⁴⁷ The UAE’s more recent policy of rapprochement with Tehran is a far cry from its previous foreign policy stance during the Trump Administration when it was one of the leading countries that lobbied the president to pursue his maximum pressure policy on Iran.⁴⁸

Bahrain

Bahrain has also indicated its willingness to normalize relations with Iran after years of hostilities between the two countries. During a recent visit to Russia, Bahrain’s King Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa indicated his willingness to mend the relationship with Tehran, telling Russian President Vladimir Putin, “We had problems with Iran, but not anymore,” he remarked. “We see no reason to delay the normalization of relations with it.” he added, “We are trying to establish normal diplomatic, trade and cultural relations with it.”⁴⁹ Bahrain is uniquely positioned in Gulf politics

due to its religious demographics as a majority Shia country ruled by a Sunni monarchy.⁵⁰

Bahrain’s royal family has long viewed the Islamic Republic of Iran with suspicion as it accused Tehran of threatening its internal security by fomenting anger within the majority Shia population.⁵¹ In 2011, as popular uprisings swept the Arab world, Bahrain’s Shia population rose up and demanded the ousting of the monarchy. The protests in neighboring Bahrain raised alarm bells in GCC countries as they accused Iran of destabilizing the internal security of Bahrain by supporting the protestors.⁵² The protests were later put down when a coalition of GCC countries crossed into Bahrain and used military force to suppress them.⁵³ In addition to more recent flareups, the royal family in Bahrain has long been wary of Tehran due to Iran’s long-standing territorial claims over the island of Bahrain.⁵⁴

As recent friendly overtures between Gulf countries and Iran have shown, the balance of power arguments espoused by foreign policy analysts supporting the Abraham Accords aren’t built on solid ground. Gulf countries are willing to tolerate Iran as long as it stops undermining their internal security through the agitation of Shia minorities. Examining Gulf politics through the lens of regime survival can explain the rush to normalize relations with Israel during the Trump Administration and the recent mending of ties between Gulf monarchies and Iran. During the first Trump Administration, Gulf monarchies saw Iran as the biggest threat to their monarchical regimes. They attempted to bend regional dynamics to their will by launching a war against the Iranian-backed Houthis in Yemen with the knowledge that they had the backing of the United States.⁵⁵ The costly adventure in Yemen has cost the Gulf coalition billions of dollars as the Houthis were able to successfully threaten vital oil infrastructure that is the life blood of the Gulf economies.⁵⁶

The failure of Gulf monarchies to erase Iran’s influence in the region has caused them to recalculate their approach and instead trade good relations with Iran for better security, as evident by the peace deal signed between Saudi Arabia and the Iranian-backed Houthis in Yemen, which ended the long and bloody war.⁵⁷ The United States’s attempts to realign its grand strategy by pivoting to Asia also encouraged Gulf

monarchies to mend their relationship with Iran, as they understood that the United States would not have their back forever.⁵⁸

Saudi Normalization Deal

The United States has made several overtures to Gulf nations, enticing them to normalize relations with Israel. However, Saudi Arabia is largely seen as the jewel in the crown due to its cultural and geopolitical significance in the region. Both Trump and Biden have attempted to court MBS to normalize relations with Israel, as they view his country as the final piece of the puzzle to achieving regional peace.

President Biden made Saudi-Israeli normalization the cornerstone of his foreign policy agenda in the Middle East. However, multiple obstacles prevented the president from achieving his signature Middle East policy.⁵⁹ Hamas's October 7 attack on Israel derailed negotiations as MBS is wary of normalizing ties with Israel at a time when the Arab world is outraged by Israel's conduct in Gaza. The prince has also insisted that a normalization agreement between Saudi Arabia and Israel cannot go ahead without the inclusion of a viable path for Palestinian statehood, a demand that has been a non-starter for Netanyahu.⁶⁰ The Israeli prime minister had long boasted that he was the only prime minister who managed to break the traditional peace framework in which Israel traded territorial concessions for peace with the Arabs. In addition to regional turbulence complicating the agreement, the Saudis set a high price for normalization as they looked to extract maximum concessions from the Biden Administration before agreeing to a deal. The Saudis have asked for security guarantees through a mutual defense pact with the United States, and the Biden Administration appeared willing to acquiesce to their demand.⁶¹

The Great Power Competition Argument

A frequently promoted argument by the Biden administration for pursuing the Abraham Accords as the signature U.S. policy in the Middle East is the desire to win the great power competition in the region. However, the U. S.'s over-sensitivity towards any sign of growing Chinese or Russian influence in the region has been exploited by Gulf Countries, as

they look to extract maximum concessions from the United States by dangling the threat of growing their ties with Beijing.⁶² In 2021, the Biden Administration announced that it had suspended the sale of F-35 fighter jets to the UAE citing concerns about Abu Dhabi's growing ties with China, the administration highlighted the use of Huawei 5G communication technology within the country and its desire to maintain Israel's qualitative military edge as reasons behind the decision.⁶³ In response, the UAE signaled its intention to acquire China's latest generation Chengdu J-20 fighter jets.⁶⁴ Abu Dhabi's intention behind its decision to obtain the latest generation stealth fighter jets from Washington's adversary is to pressure the United States to come back to the negotiation table.

Saudi Arabia has also used the threat of growing its ties with China to extract concessions from the United States. Riyadh has signaled its openness to using the Chinese Yuan instead of the dollar for settling oil payments with China. Bandar Al-Khorayef, Saudi Minister of Industry and Mineral Resources made the following comments regarding the growing relationship between the two countries during a meeting in Hong Kong: "The petroyuan is not substantial to [the ministry], we believe Saudi Arabia will do what's in its best interest ... but I think Saudi Arabia will always try new things, and is open to new ideas, and we try not to mix politics with commerce."⁶⁵ The increased cooperation between the two countries isn't limited to commerce but also extends to the military as a 2021 report by CNN revealed that Riyadh has started manufacturing its own ballistic missiles with the help of China.⁶⁶ By growing its military ties with China, Saudi Arabia looked to send a clear message to Biden at the start of his presidential term that the president will not be able to make a pariah out of the kingdom as he had promised during the campaign trail unless he wants to risk increasing China's influence in the Middle East. In another illustration of Saudi Arabia's hedging strategy, Riyadh has coordinated with Russia to extend oil production cuts despite calls by the Biden administration for Saudi Arabia to increase oil supplies to ease the energy crisis brought on by Russia's war in Ukraine.⁶⁷

In pursuit of winning the great power competition, the Biden Administration allowed Gulf countries

to employ the threat of growing their ties with Washington's adversaries to counter any reticence by the United States. The United States must stop its over-sensitivity towards any signs of growing Chinese influence in the region and trust its status as the regional hegemon, which it has built in the Middle East for many years. Acquiescing to the demands of Gulf countries out of fear of growing Chinese or Russian influence in the Middle East will only further encourage them to continue their hedging strategy. Despite the increased influence of China and Russia in the region, the United States military remains the premier fighting force in the world and the best provider of security to Gulf monarchies, U.S. policymakers must rebalance Washington's relationship with Gulf countries to reflect that fact.

The Dangers of a Security Pact with Saudi Arabia

Normalization between Saudi Arabia and Israel is not worth the asking price of putting the lives of US service members on the line to protect the Saudi royal family. The Biden Administration's advertising of the security pact with Riyadh as a mutual defense agreement is a clear case of false advertising. The proposed U.S. security pact with Saudi Arabia is a one-sided agreement in which the United States commits to aiding Saudi Arabia in case of an attack with no expectation of reciprocity.

The vagueness of the agreement also raises multiple puzzling questions: How can an attack on Saudi Arabia be defined? Does the mutual defense agreement only apply to external threats against the kingdom, or does it also apply to internal threats against the Saudi royal family, such as a popular uprising? Suppose the mutual defense agreement applies to both internal and external threats. In that case, it raises the prospect of US service members being deployed to Saudi Arabia to quell a popular uprising against an autocratic regime and possibly shooting at Saudi civilians. The Biden Administration's willingness to sign a security pact with an autocratic regime with a proven record of human rights violations leaves the door open to the aforementioned questions, as the agreement's validity relies on the continued rule of the Saudi royal family.

The proposed security pact also defies one of the main

selling points behind the brokering of a normalization deal between Saudi Arabia and Israel, which is that the deal would allow the US to pivot to Asia and leave the responsibility of curbing Iran's influence in the region to Israel plus its Gulf partners. A mutual defense pact between the United States and Saudi Arabia would further anchor the United States in the Middle East and delay its pivot to Asia, forcing it to invest significant resources to meet its new security obligations with Saudi Arabia.

Policy Recommendation

The United States should revive talks between Palestinians and Israelis using a one-state solution framework, which is already the reality on the ground. Marc Lynch, a professor of political science at George Washington University, noted the following in a *Foreign Affairs* article: "Palestine is not a state in waiting, and Israel is not a democratic state incidentally occupying Palestinian territory. All the territory west of the Jordan River has long constituted a single state under Israeli rule, where the land the people are subject to radically different legal regimes, and Palestinians are permanently treated as a lower caste. Policymakers who ignore this one-state reality will be condemned to failure and irrelevance doing little beyond proving a smokescreen for the entrenchment of the status quo."⁶⁸

The Abraham Accords offer the clearest indication that the United States has raised the white flag with regard to solving the Palestinian issue. The US has abandoned the land-for-peace model on which the two-state solution is built and circumvented the issue of Palestinian statehood in its entirety by negotiating directly with its Gulf partners about regional issues that relate to their respective countries. Netanyahu's long-held approach that Israel could achieve peace without making concessions to the Palestinians has largely been vindicated. The reaction inside Israel to the Accords has been overwhelmingly positive. Eran Etzion, the former head of Israel's national security council, expressed his satisfaction with the terms of the agreements by asking the following rhetorical question: "Which Israeli-Jewish political actor can say no to cost-free peace in the Middle East?"⁶⁹

Israeli political commentators have attributed the success of the Accords to the exclusion of Palestinians

from the negotiation table. Ariel Kahana, a senior correspondent for the newspaper Israel Hayom, has noted the following during a discussion panel on the Abraham Accords hosted by the Hudson Institute: “One of the things that made the Abraham Accords [possible] is the fact that neither Israel nor Arab states that were part of the process wanted to deal with the Palestinian issue this time around, but to go to the interest of both sides.” He continued: “That is what created the opportunity to push this forward. Once you deal with the Palestinian issue, which you have no solution for in Gaza or Judea and Samaria, once you deal with that problem that you have no solution for, that might stop the process.”⁷⁰

The Abraham Accords have put the final nail in the coffin of the two-state solution as they removed any incentive on Israel’s side to negotiate with the Palestinians. However, one only needs to look at a map of Israeli settlements in the West Bank to understand that the two-state solution died long ago. Israeli settlements in the West Bank divide the Palestinian population, making the prospect of a Palestinian state built on a unified landmass an impossibility.⁷¹ The United States should shift its foreign policy in the Middle East away from the Abraham Accords, which are not an effective framework for achieving peace in the Middle East as they ignore the central issue in the region, which is the lack of Palestinian statehood.

The policies of Netanyahu’s right-wing government are hastening the prospect of a one-state solution, as his attempts to annex the West Bank and his delegitimization of the Palestinian Authority (PA) accelerate the one-state reality by dismantling the institutional remnants of the Oslo Accords. In February 2023, Israel’s current serving finance minister, Bezalel Smotrich, signed an agreement with Defense Minister Yoav Gallant that anointed him with new powers, effectively making him the czar of colonization policies in the West Bank.⁷² The agreement has all but made annexation of the West Bank official as it transformed many administrative powers from military to civilian command.⁷³

Netanyahu’s government has also worked to delegitimize the PA as he pursues a divide-and-conquer strategy. In response to the decision by three countries to recognize a Palestinian state, Israel’s

finance minister has announced that the government will not be sending much-needed tax revenue to the Palestinian Authority, which is on the brink of a financial crisis.⁷⁴ The motivation behind the constant attacks against the PA by Netanyahu’s government is to ensure that Palestinians are not unified under one governance that is capable of representing them but separated into a Gaza Strip governed by Hamas and the West Bank governed by Fatah. The separation ensures that a two-state solution could never come to fruition. After all, who is Netanyahu supposed to negotiate with if Palestinians don’t have a unified body representing them?

Conclusion

The Abraham Accords are not a stable peace model for the Middle East as they do not alter the status quo and ignore the central issue facing the region, which is the lack of Palestinian statehood. Instead of investing political capital in normalizing relations between Israel and Gulf countries, none of whom Israel is at war with, the United States must shift its focus back to solving the Palestinian issue through innovative solutions that acknowledge the one-state reality on the ground. The prospect of a one-state solution looks bleak when looking at the current Palestinian and Israeli leadership. However, the United States must not avoid the challenge by hiding behind a dead two-state solution and hailing a series of glorified free trade agreements as the key to peace in the Middle East.

Endnotes

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