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Executive Summary Report



Last week, the GEOIntelligence Group published its first recurring monthly White Paper on Great Power Competition. Generally, White Papers will be on strategic topics, and in many cases, be accompanied by spin-off Executive Summary Reports (or “ExSums”) that augment the White Papers by addressing related issues. For example, our first two ExSums were on the China-Taiwan challenges and the ongoing Ukraine-Russia War – topics very much aligned with Great Power Competition.

The GEOIntelligence Group has deep expertise and experience in many areas, including regional issues and topical challenges. This ExSum focuses on a regional area, broadly the Middle East, with an emphasis on the changing relationships between Israel and its Arab neighbors. The Middle East is opening up economically, and conflict is waning in several (but not all) areas, enabled by diplomacy and/or normalization of relationships.

One of the cornerstones in recent diplomatic efforts was the 2020 Abraham Accords, that continues, after three years, to not only shape the strategic relationships between Israel and the Arab signatories of the Accords, but those of the broader Middle East and Islamic world as well. The diplomatic success of the Accords might not only be largely unknown, but are also underrated, as the Accords have the potential to spiral into further strategic opportunities for Israel, the Middle East, and the West in general.

Abraham Accords Key Points

- In modern history, the Middle East weathered geopolitical storms, including Cold War rivalry, many revolutions, and the rise of an unwelcomed, but over time a militarily dominant Israel.
- Israeli-Arab relations, while not the only source of strife in the Middle East, loomed over many conflicts and disagreements, impacting everything from diplomacy to economics.
- After several conflicts including First Arab-Israeli War of 1948, the 1967 Arab-Israeli War, and the 1973 Yom Kippur War, Egypt normalized relations with Israel in 1979. Jordan followed suit in 1994. Until recently, these were the only two states in the Middle East to recognize Israel with full diplomatic privileges, that include the premise of Israel’s right to exist.
- The Abraham Accords between Israel and the countries of the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Bahrain, Sudan, and Morocco, have genuinely reshaped the fabric of Israeli-Arab relationships.
- Fear of Iran over hatred of Israel may have played a role in the recent normalization of relations. To that end, Saudi Arabia might be on the cusp of joining the Accords with profound implications for the region, likely bringing more Arab nations to join.



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Background:

Arguably the most significant Middle East foreign policy success for the Trump Administration was the establishment of the Abraham Accords in 2020. The Accords, or Normalization Agreements between the State of Israel and the countries of the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Bahrain, Sudan, and Morocco, have dramatically improved Israeli-Arab relationships. Between August and December of 2020, the Trump administration successfully orchestrated the negotiations and formation of several agreements, foremost being the Abraham Accords.

There is a common assessment among foreign policy experts that none of the agreements could have become a reality without the consent of Saudi Arabia. The U.S. also provided most, if not all the parties policy, security, and/or economic incentives to get the signatories to agree to the tenants of the Accords.

Previously, Egypt and Jordan normalized relations with Israel in 1979 and 1994, respectively. The Abraham Accords added four more Arab League states, with UAE, Bahrain, Morocco, and Sudan also formally recognizing Israel's right to exist, along with diplomatic, economic, and security relationships with Israel. The establishment of the Accords provided a clear statement by the signatories that individual national interests overshadow the historic collective interests of the Arab League and the 2003 Arab Peace Initiative (API), outlining the preconditions for an Israel/Palestinian Two State Solution.

Abraham Accords Declaration:

"Mutual Understanding and Co-existence: The Parties will undertake to foster mutual understanding, respect, co-existence, and a culture of peace between their societies in the spirit of their common ancestors:

- A commitment to resolve ongoing and future conflicts through peaceful means and negotiations.
- Establishment of Diplomatic Missions or Embassies, exchange of Ambassadors, establishment of consular services, and the formation of diplomatic agendas.
- Cooperation and Agreements in other spheres: Advancing the cause of peace, stability, and prosperity throughout the Middle East through the development of a Strategic Agenda for the Middle East.
- Seek opportunities and develop concepts and optimally formal programs for Finance and Investment - Civil Aviation and Overflight - Visas and Consular Services - Innovation, Trade, and Economic Relations - Healthcare - Science, Technology and Peaceful Uses of Outer-Space - Tourism, Culture, and Sport - Energy - Environment - Education - Maritime Arrangements - Telecommunications and Post - Agriculture and Food Security - Water - Legal Cooperation.
- The Parties shall work together to counter extremism, which promotes hatred and division, and terrorism and its justifications, including by preventing radicalization and recruitment and by combating incitement and discrimination.
- Continued recognition of the Treaties of Peace between the State of Israel and the Arab Republic of Egypt; and between the State of Israel and the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan; and a commitment to working together to realize a negotiated solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict."

Implications

The Accords came to fruition as an offramp for Prime Minister Bibi Netanyahu's threats of annexation/ application of Israeli sovereignty in the West Bank territories in the Spring of 2020.

While the immediate effect of the Accords did cease the threats of annexation, the Palestinian Authority (PA) adamantly opposes the Accords and believes the signatories have betrayed the Palestinian people concurrent with undermining the API agreed to by the Arab League.

The PA continues to refuse to leverage the Accords, despite the encouragement of the U.S., Saudi Arabi, and the Accord signatories. There is no prospect for reinitiating the Peace Process dialogue between Israel and the PA under the current Israeli and PA leadership.

Since the signing of the Accords, Israel and the participating Arab States are unquestionably benefiting in the areas of security, economics, and cultural understanding.

According to the Israeli Foreign Ministry, trade has increased approximately \$600 million in 2019 to \$2.8 billion in 2022. Israeli tourism in Accords countries increased from 39,300 visitors to over 470,000,000 over the past three years. There are 17 routine flight routes between Israel and Accords countries. Many flights are enabled by access to Saudi airspace, which also enhances commercial and cultural exchange. As of 2023, dozens of State-level, ministerial, and security leader visits have taken place, enabling strategic dialogue.

Forecast:

The Biden Administration has embraced the Normalization Agreements. Secretary Blinken has participated in the Negev Summit(s), first hosted by Israel, and intends to continue participating as they rotate among the Accords-signatory countries. However, the 2nd Negev Summit hosted by Morocco was suspended due to the ongoing conflict in the West Bank, and a recent announcement of increasing Israeli settlements in the West Bank.

The U.S. is involved in a concerted dialogue with Israel and Saudi Arabia to orchestrate the next Normalization Agreement between the two countries; however, Israeli internal politics and the ongoing Israeli/Palestinian conflict are both a distraction and are undermining the possibility of an Israeli/Saudi agreement in the near term.

The Saudi Foreign Ministry has stated publicly on multiple occasions that there is an expectation of Israel to demonstrate its commitment to resolving the Israeli/Palestinian conflict. Despite these setbacks, the foundation for strategic dialogue, commercial trade, security cooperation, technology exchange, and cultural people to people exchange among the Accords signatories has a strong foothold. The Rand Foundation estimates that the Accords could generate as many as 4 million new jobs and \$1 trillion in economic activity by 2030. The Accords have opened new prospects and new markets for international investment that organizations like the European Union see as a significant opportunity for Europe.

It is unlikely that the PA will reconsider its strong opposition to the Accords and use the Accords as a vehicle to improve the lives for Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza. Current security tensions and the animosity between leaders run too deep to expect a substantive shift, despite the opportunities available.

Senior officials of the U.S. State Department will continue to pursue normalization between Israel and Saudi Arabia, perhaps even aggressively. According to some experts, a future proposal might involve U.S. guarantees to Saudi Arabia regarding security, trade, and perhaps even civil nuclear power, yet they would need to be balanced in such a way as to be acceptable to Israel.

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