

Review essay

Abraham Accords: Palestine issue should be addressed for a peaceful Middle East

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Abstract: Decades of tensions in the Middle East have left many regional countries in tatters. The Abraham Accords – a joint declaration of the United States, Israel, and the United Arab Emirates, was signed alongside a peace agreement, although there has never been a state of war or conflict between Israel and the UAE. To achieve full peace and stability in the region, the resolution of the Palestine-Israeli conflict is vital. The United States and Israel have a long history of cooperation in the maintenance of the security of Israel that ensures the protection of US interests to the detriment of other regional powers that may have the potential to become influential in the region, and that ignore Western interests. Geopolitical changes in the Middle East over the last decade have altered the threat perspective of the Arab monarchies. Support for the creation of an independent Palestine has diminished as the issue has started to be seen as a distraction from the real and immediate threats from emerging regional powers. Although the Gulf nations may wish to present themselves as the Arab protector of Palestine, they clarify that “every tub must stand on its own bottom.” The US support of a peaceful environment was a result of the Chinese presence in the region, which the former perceived as a threat to its hegemony. However, long-term peace cannot be achieved without taking into account the Palestinian issue, as the primary conflict. In the same vein, countries such as Iran and Turkey did not welcome the normalization situation between Israel and the Arab states due to the ignorance of the Palestinians’ interests. There are weaknesses of the Accords perhaps due to its impatient timing, and its contradiction with the international community, such as the UN, and its disregard of the two-state solution.

Keywords: peace deal, UAE-Israel, deal of the century, Trump administration, Middle East

İbrahim Anlaşması: Barışçıl bir Orta Doğu için Filistin meselesi ele alınmalıdır

Öz: Orta Doğu'da on yıllardır süren gerginlik birçok ülkeyi paramparça hale getirmiştir. Bu gerginlik kapsamında İsrail ve Birleşik Arap Emirlikleri arasında bir savaş veya çatışma olmamasına rağmen, Amerika Birleşik Devletleri, İsrail ve Birleşik Arap Emirlikleri'nin ortak deklarasyonu olan İbrahim Anlaşması imzalanmıştır. Bölgede tam bir barış ve istikrar için ise Filistin-İsrail sorununun çözülmesi hayati öneme sahiptir. Amerika Birleşik Devletleri ile İsrail'in, bölgede etkili olma potansiyeline sahip diğer ülkelerin aleyhine olacak şekilde, Amerika'nın bölgesel çıkarları ve İsrail'in güvenliğini sağlamaya dayalı uzun bir iş birliği geçmişleri bulunmaktadır. Son on yılda Orta Doğu'daki jeopolitik değişimler Arap monarşilerinin tehdit algılarını değiştirmiştir. Bağımsız bir Filistin kurma yönündeki destek ise giderek azalmıştır, çünkü bu konu yükselen bölgesel güçlerden kaynaklanan gerçek ve acil tehditlerden bir sapma olarak görülmektedir. Körfez ülkeleri kendilerini Filistin'in Arap koruyucuları olarak gösterebilirler de "her koyun kendi bacağından asılır" yönünde açık bir irade sergilemektedirler. Amerika Birleşik Devletleri'nin bölge barışına desteği, tehdit olarak gördüğü Çin'in bölgesel ilgisi sonrası artmıştır. Ancak uzun vadeli barış, sorunun esas kaynağı olan Filistin sorunu çözülmeden sağlanamaz. Benzer şekilde Filistin'in çıkarlarına aykırı olacağı düşüncesiyle, Türkiye ve İran gibi ülkeler de İsrail ile Arap ülkeleri arasında normalleşmeye karşı çıkmaktadırlar. İbrahim Anlaşmalarının zamanlama, uluslararası toplumla çelişme ve iki devletli çözümü reddetme gibi zayıflıkları bulunmaktadır.

Anahtar kelimeler: barış anlaşması, BAE-İsrail, yüzyılın anlaşması, Trump dönemi, Orta Doğu

The United States as a dominant actor

Israel's security has always been a building block in the United States' (US) foreign policy decisions with regards to the Middle East. The Abraham Accords promote the formation of a regional coalition of Israel and the Arab nations that are close to the US, and to create a balance of power as a catalyst to other regional powers that have sought to exert influence to the detriment of Western interests

(Hamdi 2018). The US dominance in the peace negotiations may be evidenced by the emphasis given to the Accords for further cooperation under the leadership of the Trump administration,¹ with the timing of the agreement immediately prior to the US elections revealing the calculations.

The main goals of the Trump administration, which brokered the Abraham Accords, were to obtain the support of the Jewish lobby prior to the elections, to hamper the foreign policy objectives of Iran by establishing a block in the region, and most importantly, as part of the US grand strategy, to curb the increased Chinese presence in the Middle East.

From a historical perspective, the establishment of the "new Middle East project" under the Bush administration promoted the supremacy of Israel as a strategic tool for the obstruction of other influential powers. The mutual interests of the United States and Israel guarantee a strong level of cooperation between them, and while there are goals to promote political, economic, and social development in the region, these plans would appear to be of secondary importance, at best.

It is interesting to note that there is no reference to the challenge posed by Iran in the agreement, which can be attributed to the fact that Iran is not a priority issue on the US agenda, although it is for both Israel and the United States. It is possible that this issue is being addressed through confidential letters or side agreements due to its political sensitivity to prevent Iran from stirring up further trouble in the region as a response to this deal (Dekel and Shusterman 2021). Yet, Donald Trump, as the peace broker, stated at the press conference in the Oval Office that he anticipated entering into a good deal with Iran on the nuclear issue if he were to be reelected in the upcoming presidential elections (Dekel and Shusterman 2021).

The peace agreement calls for cooperation in a range of civilian areas, including the cultivation of people-to-people programs, interfaith dialog, and youth exchange programs, as well as in health, innovation, and tourism (TJP 2020; Ahren 2020). The agreement further facilitates the improvement of trade and economic relations through cooperation in technology and science, suggesting that the primary objective of the United States is to create a regional block that can respond to the increased Chinese investments in the region. Although the cooperation between the United States and Israel goes back many years, it has never led to a tangible peace agreement between the regional states.

¹ Abraham Accords 2020, Article 7: "Parties have promised to stand ready to join with the United States to develop and launch a strategic Agenda for the Middle East in order to expand regional diplomatic, trade, stability and other cooperation."

China's increasing technological investments and the high-tech and the increasing 5G network piqued Washington's attention. Trump's national security adviser Robert O' Brien said that the Accords block China from Israel's tech sector to some extent. Several Chinese tech companies, including Huawei and AliExpress, have been established in Israel, and the country is seen as an important collaborator in the Digital Silk Road (Fulton 2021). The Beijing Genomics Institute has made investments throughout the Middle East and also signed a contract to establish a COVID-19 testing laboratory in Israel (Muoio 2021). Aside from its desire to make a political gain prior to the elections, the Trump administration increased its support and gifted this peace agreement to Israel to maintain its strategic base in the Middle East by collaborating with local partners and thus exclude any further influence of its number one enemy – China.

The United States has vast military assets and has provided weapons to Gulf countries which have quickly grown to become its top customers, thus giving the US considerable leverage over the regional monarchies. Although these nations control significant oil reserves and have a much higher income than the global average, their populations are sparse, and they lack any form of collective security structure (Hajjar 2002). In other words, the Gulf States need to look for the support of a superpower if their security is to be ensured.

The previous animosity between the Gulf monarchies and former US President Barak Obama arose from the fact that the Iran nuclear deal had been signed under his watch, bringing them closer to China and Russia, and this seems to have influenced the decision-making process before signing the Accords. Trump has decided to stop Gulf's financial sources funneling to Chinese companies and eliminate this investment trend altogether.

Washington offers its allies weapons and security in exchange for cooperation, and while the UAE was promised F-35s in return for their signature on the agreement, a deal to which they immediately agreed and signed the Accords, the deal has been suspended for now under the Joe Biden administration (Samuels 2021). Even though the Palestinian conflict has long dominated foreign policy in the Gulf for many years, it would seem that the nations have now decided to prioritize their own interests.

In a short time, the agreement was expanded to include North African countries, namely Sudan and Morocco, and in time will probably spread further throughout the region. Sudan, which is predominantly Muslim, officially signed the agreement just over two months after Trump announced that Sudan would be normalizing its ties with Israel (Arab News 2021). In return, Washington agreed to remove Sudan from the list of State Sponsors of Terrorism, to remove

the ongoing economic sanctions, and to launch negotiations on debt forgiveness (Suliman and Gubash 2021). The United States and Israel would also alleviate the restrictions imposed on other actors to give the Abraham Accords a wider base and a regional character, given that peace with only a few nations would contribute little to the security of Israel, and hence, the United States. Concerning Saudi Arabia, due to Bahrain's relative dependence on the country, it is likely that it sought approval from Saudi Arabia before signing the Abraham Accords, which could indicate that Saudi Arabia is taking a more positive view of Israel.

Saudi Arabia, however, has internal pressures against normalization, with Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman stating in an interview that establishing ties with Israel would lead to him being killed by the people of Qatar, Iran, and Saudi Arabia (MEE 2020a). Although to date, the neighboring peace agreement has not transformed Saudi-Israeli relations into visible ties, it does not prevent backchannel communications, and according to a Mossad chief, Riyadh is on the way to normalizing ties with Israel (Arnaout 2020).

Israel

The Abraham Accords, which have eliminated the barriers to diplomatic relations between Israel and some Arab nations, are a significant political achievement for Israel. On a personal level, the Accords give Benjamin Netanyahu a domestic boost that will be useful in easing the existing internal conflicts in the country, while in the bigger picture, it has expanded Israel's political image globally.

Israel could have improved its position by demanding more visible action against Iran, which it sees as a regional threat to its existence, but as mentioned earlier, the text of the agreement makes no mention of Iran. Israel could also have bargained for formal military cooperation against external enemies or the internal counter-groups spread throughout the region, which would have served as a deterrent against Iran and establish a secure environment for Israel. In February 2020, Iran's Strategic Council on Foreign Relations envisaged "that the Occupied Territories will in the future witness a new Intifada against the Zionist regime that will involve more support from Iran than the previous one" (Ahmed 2021).

It was also a considerable achievement of Israel to have no mention of the two-state solution made within the text of the Accords. It could perhaps have sought greater recognition of its occupied territories in the document, particularly the status of Jerusalem as a capital city of the State of Israel. In 1980, Israel passed the Jerusalem Law in which it is stated that "Jerusalem, complete

and united, is the capital of Israel,"² and while it maintains its primary governmental institutions in Jerusalem, its claim is not widely recognized by the international community. The wider recognition and support for Jerusalem as State of Israel's capital could have been done by Emirates opening its first embassy in Jerusalem, instead of Tel Aviv, following the example of the United States under the Trump administration, and could have been achieved through US pressure on Abu Dhabi, which needs US weapons to secure itself against Iran and counter-groups such as Hamas and Hezbollah in the region. Such a step, however, would bring a great deal of negative attention to the United Arab Emirates. Despite Israel trying to legitimize itself as a state in the occupied territories, the Muslim population and human rights groups still don't seem ready to surrender.

Israel could also have bargained with the United States to use its influence to convince other regional actors to establish ties, such as Saudi Arabia, although the Saudi authorities have declared that there will be no ties with Israel without a Palestinian state (MEE 2020b). While they have been engaged in backchannel communications anyway and secretly cooperate against Iran (Heller and Kalin 2017), official relations would further boost Israel's situation, as Saudi Arabia is seen as a religious leader in the Middle East. In other words, it could legitimize the policy toward Israel in the eyes of the public.

United Arab Emirates

UAE foreign policy has been more proactive since the unsuccessful attempt of Dubai Ports (DP) World to acquire six US ports, which highlighted the insufficiency of Abu Dhabi's soft power in the context of its relations with the United States (Al Ketbi 2020). Since then, the United Arab Emirates has been working to improve its image in the halls of Washington DC by supporting US interests in its lobbying activities. The Abraham Accords emanates from the same paradigm shift.

There has been uncertainty about whether Israel will withdraw its objection to the sale of arms (F-35s) to the Emirates, or even if it did, whether the US would succeed in getting the deal through its internal legislative bodies (Guzansky and Marshall 2020), given the US legal limits on arms sales to Israel's neighbors, which may adversely affect its Qualitative Military Edge (QME) over them (CRS 2020). In December, a bill introduced by the Democrats aiming to scupper President Trump's efforts to sell F-35s to Abu Dhabi failed to attract the necessary

² No 980 Basic Law: Jerusalem, Capital of Israel, August 5, 1980. Accessed April 4, 2021. https://www.knesset.gov.il/laws/special/eng/basic10_eng.htm.

majority (Williams and Lederman 2020), although more recently, the Biden administration has suspended the sale. Benny Gantz, Minister of Defense of Israel, has stated that it would not be “good” for Israel if other countries obtained the F-35 (Gross 2020), and in the same vein, Netanyahu has said that the F-35s weren’t part of the peace deal (Williams and Lederman 2020).

The United Arab Emirates could have sought a guarantee to access to sophisticated weapons, including F-35s, from the United States prior to, and in exchange for, the normalization of ties with Israel. The Abraham Accords focus mainly on cooperation in civilian matters, and make no mention of the sale of military weapons or military cooperation. The Emirates, as one of the top-five customers of US military assets, should have used its wealth leverage, and emphasized that the acquisition of F-35s or similar advanced weapons should not be considered as posing a threat to Israel, in that its primary concern is defending itself against Iran, the common denominator in the triple alliance. Strengthening the capacity of the Emirati military would increase the range of military and political options available for the US to address crises in the region (CRS 2020). The sale of F-35s would be in accordance with the burden-sharing narrative of the Trump administration, in that the United Arab Emirates could have been said to have paid its “fair share” by fighting against common enemies.

Cooperations between states result in a win-win situation only if it is they are the product of a good bargain. The former CIA Director Mike Pompeo stated that the Abraham Accords would not have been signed if the Trump administration had not made a “180-degree turn” in its approach to Iran. The Iranian issue was the primary factor taken into account by the Gulf States when deciding whether or not to normalize ties with Israel. The UAE could have sought warranties from the United States not to deal with Iran. Trump withdrew the Iran-US Nuclear Deal, but there is still no indication whether the Biden administration would follow the line drawn by Trump. If the Emirate could succeed in having a “no deal with Iran” clause included in the Accords, it would be an international obligation, although it is clear that the United States would not permit any limits placed on its actions, as while the United States does not want Iran to be powerful, it may see a benefit on cooperation, as previous, in pursuit of its national objectives. Also, it is not easy to convince states to meet their obligations, as the international arena lacks any workable enforcement mechanism (Alden and Aran 2017, 5).

The United Arab Emirates could choose to stand by the Palestinian cause for its own benefit, if not for that of the Palestinians. For many years, the Palestinian cause has provided significant leverage to Arab states at the negotiation table with foreign governments, so much so that it has been abused as an effective

bargaining chip. If the Emirates had insisted on the rights of Palestinians under international law while cooperating on issues including, but not limited to, the economy, trade, and science, it would perhaps have achieved a better payoff. In this way, it could have ensured peaceful diplomatic relationships while leaving the door open for the Palestinian state as a cause in the event of an unpredictable situation.

Lessons learned from the Abraham Accords

First and foremost, the Abraham Accords may pave the way for future crises, as they fail to promote peace by completely disregarding the Palestinian issue. This has several implications for the future environment in the Middle East.

There can be no long-term peace unless states get to the root of the problem. The 2020 Peace Plan, which has been made to bring stability and peace in the Middle East, has nothing to do with the Palestinian issue but is a major issue in the region. Despite the UAE's efforts to present itself as the protector of the Palestinian people's interests when signing the agreement, it is a stab in the back of Palestinians. This is clear from the fact that shortly after the deal was declared, Netanyahu reported that he had merely agreed to "delay" annexation, and would never give up the rights of Israelis to Israeli land (Sprusansky 2020). This statement reveals that there will be a more dedicated Israel that is able to draw power from the neighboring Gulf monarchies to the detriment of the people of Palestine, thus solidifying Israel's place in the region. Palestinians might take note that fraternal loyalty is unreliable. The international community and the United States have long held that only direct dialogue between Israel and Palestine can provide a path to a peaceful and permanent resolution. Accordingly, the negotiations should have been made with the participation of the Palestinian Authority, as the two states could perhaps have reached a compromise this time, and even if they didn't manage to settle, at least they would have had the opportunity to do so. This would have made the negotiations that resulted in the Accords at least *appear* legitimate.

As Abraham Lincoln once said, "Give me six hours to chop down a tree and I will spend the first four sharpening the axe." The Trump administration wanted to take credit for the deal of the century prior to the elections, and took the ball before the bound. The Accords did not emphasize the complex territorial disputes that are the main source of instability in the region, thus making the "Peace Deal" superficial.

Secondly, a principled peace plan would have come up with a durable solution for the more than 7 million Palestinian refugees. Since the 1947 Israel-Palestine war, millions of Palestinian refugees have been dispersed all over the

world, suffering both rejection and homelessness. The right of return of Palestinians could be proposed as a condition of a full diplomatic relationship.

The refugee problem is an ongoing issue around the world, and every state should take steps in cooperation with another to help bring this to an end. A refugee wave would place a considerable burden on such neighboring Arab countries as Egypt or Tunisia as the world passes through an economic recession, as these countries barely have sufficient resources for their own people. As the United Arab Emirates does not seem keen to open its doors to the Palestinians to offer them refugee protection or jobs, this would result in the suffering of many more women and children.

This is not the first time the Palestinian issue has not been considered a priority in US foreign policy. Any peace initiatives that do not mention Palestinians would suffer from a legitimacy crisis in the eyes of the international community. The Accords only encouraged Israel to impose its sovereignty in violation of international resolutions in which annexation is considered illegal (UNSC 2016). The United Arab Emirates is breaking international law by cooperating with Israel and ignoring the two-state solution accepted by the United Nations Security Council and the General Assembly, and this move could encourage other states to violate decisions taken at the international level if there are no consequences. In short, the United Nations should require states to comply with its resolutions in the interest of international peace and security.

Thirdly, the Palestinians may return to violence, as it is clear that there is no one looking out for their interests but themselves. The resulting frustration would be a constant aggravation, to the detriment of both Israel and the United Arab Emirates. Israeli journalist Eli Podeh provided a warning of the hazards that this scenario could bring: "Israel is wrong to seek agreement with Arab states while circumventing the Palestinians. Its attempt to isolate and weaken the Palestinians could end in the Palestinians being pushed towards violent struggle as a last resort. Israel will then claim that the Palestinians have reverted to violence once again, ignoring its role in this deterioration" (Podeh 2020). In reality, to achieve peace the Palestinians should first be provided a fair and equitable environment, and the two nations should be treated equally to prevent any violations.

Disregarding the two-state solution has had the anticipated "domino effect" (BBC News 2020), as some Arab states continue to hold out. Commenting on the peace agreement, Kuwait stated that "it would be the last to normalize the relations" with Israel (Staff 2020). Qatar stated a similar approach, stating that there would be no normalization of ties with Israel as long as the Palestinian cause remains unresolved (Al Jazeera 2020). While the Arab unity seems to be

broken, time will tell whether the remaining Arab states will join the train. A number of well-known diplomats have stated that more countries will establish peaceful ties with Israel, based on the opinion that there has never been an actual state of conflict between other Arab countries and Israel. The Palestinian cause has been consistently abused by Arab nations as a bargaining chip at the negotiation table with other states to achieve a better deal. The Abraham Accords verify this, as no dedicated Arab country would sign the agreement and make such a rapid 180-degree about-turn.

Another weakness of the Accords is that the Arab public has never consented to the normalization of ties with Israel. Gulf monarchies are wealthy but are weak in terms of having no strategic depth (Trigano 2021). What the future holds for these states is unclear. Palace revolutions, invasions, riots, or Iranian-backed fighters coming into the country for manipulation to start an uprising against the monarchy system are all possible. The Accords were not brought to the table in one day, as they were rather the result of decades of negotiations, and those who penned them could have sought consent through the use of mass media, influencers or academicians prior to the deal. It may be possible that the economically wealthy people in the Gulf would choose not to criticize their monarchs so deeply or profoundly, as they are content with their quality of life at the moment. Changes tend to be made by a willing public that is unhappy with its current situation.

Even though the governments have agreed to normalize ties, the Arab public remains strongly supportive of Palestine. In a survey conducted by the Arab Barometer with people in Algeria, Jordan, Morocco, Libya, Tunisia, and Lebanon to understand their attitudes towards the deal, fewer than 10 percent said they favor the Abraham Accords in all states, except Lebanon.

For a long-term and true peace in the Middle East, Israel should confront the Palestinian issue rather than throwing a veil over it, which has been at the heart of the conflict from the outset. The Emirates should learn lessons from the Arab Spring, mainly that public opinion matters, that furious crowds toppled many leaders due to their political dissatisfaction and that no one considers monarchies to be an exception. This may be more evident in 10–20 years when the oil and petroleum are exhausted, since crowds are furious when they are economically vulnerable. The Abraham Accords were not a successful bargain in the long term for the United Arab Emirates, and any country that is about to join the “train” should look not only at today, but also tomorrow.

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