

## RELIGIOUS IDENTITY AND RELIGIOUS LEGITIMACY IN INTERNATIONAL POLITICS: THE CASE OF THE ISRAEL-UAE ABRAHAM ACCORD

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### ABSTRACT

**Keywords:**  
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UAE.

This paper addresses the following question: In what ways do Israel and the UAE construct their shared religious identity and provide religious legitimacy through and for the Abraham Accords? Using interpretive-qualitative methods and guided by constructivism, this paper draws on primary and secondary sources. The findings reveal that both countries constructed their shared identity as fellow Abrahamic communities by naming their agreement after Abraham and through joint statements. Furthermore, three steps were taken to legitimize the Abraham Accords. First, both countries linked the Abraham Accords to the Abrahamic norms and teachings. Second, the UAE government cited Qur'anic verses and worked with religious authorities for domestic legitimacy. Third, the Israeli government strategically seeks international legitimacy by linking the Abraham Accords to Jewish primordial sentiment to secure broader international political support. Lastly, this paper argues that the UAE utilized the Abraham Accords to strengthen its moderate identity, whereas Israel used it to empower the global Jewish community. This study contributes to Abraham Accords discourse by emphasizing religion's role and its intersection with international politics.

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### المخلص

**الكلمات المفتاحية:**  
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تتناول هذه الدراسة السؤال الآتي: كيف تنشئ إسرائيل والإمارات هويتها الدينية المشتركة وتوفران المشروعية الدينية من خلال اتفاقات أبراهام ولها؟ واعتمدت الدراسة المنهج النوعي التفسيري، مستندة إلى النظرية البنائية في العلاقات الدولية، وإلى مصادر أولية وثانوية. وتظهر النتائج أن الدولتين قامتا ببناء هويتها المشتركة بوصفها جماعتين إبراهيميتين من خلال تسمية الاتفاقية باسم إبراهيم، وكذلك عبر البيانات المشتركة. كما جرى اتخاذ ثلاث خطوات لتأطير المشروعية الدينية للاتفاقات: أولاً، ربطت الدولتان اتفاقات أبراهام بالقيم والتعاليم الإبراهيمية. ثانياً، استندت الحكومة الإماراتية إلى آيات قرآنية وتعاونت مع السلطات الدينية لتحقيق المشروعية الداخلية. ثالثاً، سعت الحكومة الإسرائيلية إلى المشروعية الدولية عبر ربط الاتفاقات بالشعور اليهودي الأصلي، بما يضمن دعفاً سياسياً دولياً أوسع. وتخلص الدراسة إلى أن الإمارات وظفت الاتفاقات لتعزيز هويتها المعتدلة، بينما استخدمتها إسرائيل لتعزيز الجماعة اليهودية العالمية. وتسهم هذه الدراسة في إثراء أدبيات اتفاقات أبراهام عبر إبراز البعد الديني وتقاطعها مع السياسة الدولية

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## INTRODUCTION

The relationship between Israel and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) is inextricably linked to the evolution of Israel's relations with other Middle Eastern Arab countries. When the British established the state of Israel in 1948, Arab countries refused to recognize Israeli sovereignty (Adhim & Yuliati, 2021). Tensions peaked in 1967 and 1973 when Israel and the Arab alliance engaged in military conflicts. The Six-Day War occurred in 1967, and it pitted Israel against a coalition of Egypt, Jordan, Syria, and Iraq. The Yom Kippur War took place six years later, in 1973, between Israel and an alliance of Arab countries led by Egypt and Syria (Pratama et al., 2023). Consequently, relations between Arab countries and Israel were deteriorating, worsened by the ongoing Israel-Palestine conflict.

The geopolitical landscape of the Middle East started to shift over time. This shift pushed some Arab countries to re-examine their stances toward Israel, including the possibility of normalization (Guzansky, 2014; Siddiqui, 2025). Egypt was the first country in the Middle East to restore ties with Israel in 1979. Following Egypt, Jordan also normalized its diplomatic ties with Israel in 1994. Derajat and Kurniawan (2022) stated that their reconciliation with Israel was driven by both economic and security factors.

After two decades, the United Arab Emirates became the third Middle Eastern country to reconcile with Israel. Their reconciliation, however, had been a lengthy process. The UAE, like other Arab countries, initially rejected the recognition of Israel. Nevertheless, their relations were later influenced by political and economic factors (Traub et al., 2022). It is demonstrated when the UAE secretly developed ties with Israel in a number of sectors, such as trade, intelligence, technology, and health. In 2019, the UAE publicly signaled its willingness to normalize relations with Israel by opening direct flight routes from and to Israel (Tohme, 2022)

In August 2020, Israel and the UAE—mediated by the United States—officially declared an agreement to fully normalize their diplomatic relations. Their normalization deal is known as the Abraham Accords, and it was signed simultaneously by Israel, the UAE, the United States, and Bahrain in September 2020, with Morocco and Sudan following a few weeks later. However, this paper will solely focus on the Israel-UAE Abraham Accords, as it is the only document that details their cooperation commitments in multiple sectors, including in the religious domain (U.S. Department of State, 2020).

To better comprehend the issue, we have reviewed previous studies which examined the normalization of Israel and the UAE from different focuses of analysis. Papers by Ahmadi and Bumi (2022) and Herdian (2024) explore the Abraham Accords from the standpoint of both countries' national interests. Both studies indicate that the normalization between the two countries has been formed by shared political, security, and economic interests. In the political and security domains, Israel and the UAE have a common perception of the potential military threat posed by Iran. Therefore, both countries believe that balancing measures via normalization are necessary. At the same time, the Abraham Accords is set to foster greater economic partnership between the two countries.

Apart from examining the Abraham Accords through the concept of national interest, papers by Melkumyan (2021) and Massalha (2022) provide an impact-based analysis of the agreement. They argued that the Abraham Accords had strengthened trade intensity between the two countries. Furthermore, assuming political stability is maintained, they speculated that the Abraham Accords could be the first step toward regional economic integration. But as Sevilla (2024) argued, Israel-UAE normalization didn't make substantial progress in stabilizing the Middle Eastern political condition.

We find it clear that all the papers mentioned earlier tend to focus on the material-traditional dimensions of international politics, such as security and economy. It is evident from the papers' theoretical frameworks, which are still circling around the realist concept

of national interest as well as the liberalist concept of economic interdependence and integration. Therefore, there has been inadequate analysis on the non-material dimensions of the Abraham Accords.

Paper by Jeong (2021) is one of the few articles that bridges the discussion of material and non-material dimensions within the Israel-UAE normalization. The paper examines how religious tolerance and religious freedom shape foreign-policy agenda setting among the United States, Israel, and the UAE. Jeong (2021) further argues that shared Abrahamic narratives and interfaith discourse are used to frame Israel-UAE normalization for pragmatic interests. This proves that religion plays a significant role in shaping political agendas and advancing normalization efforts, regardless of institutional, legal, and political constraints.

Furthermore, it was Baqi (2022) who foregrounded the role of identity in the Israel-UAE normalization. The paper highlights how the Israel-UAE normalization was shaped by their shared identity. It is argued that the collective identity was formed due to the strong alliance with the United States as well as their rivalry with Iran. Moreover, the commonality of Abrahamic religion adherents further strengthened their shared identity.

We affirm Jeong's (2021) argument that the process of normalization between Israel and the UAE is substantially influenced by non-material aspects. We also agree with Baqi's (2021) analysis that Israel and the UAE indeed share a religion-based identity. However, the question of how the countries established their identity in the normalization agreement and how influential religion is to the identity construction has been left unexplored. This paper fills the gap by focusing on how the religious dimension of the Abraham Accords was constructed, as we posit that religion plays an important role in shaping Israel-UAE's shared identity as well as in their quest for the legitimacy of the normalization agreement.

The significance of religious aspects in Israel-UAE normalization is reflected in the name of the agreement, which is taken from Abraham, an important figure in Jewish, Islamic, and Christian beliefs (Elman & Shams, 2022). This insertion of a religious figure in naming the so-called political and economic agreement is an interesting research gap to examine. Therefore, this paper aims to answer the following question: In what ways do Israel and the UAE construct their shared religious identity and provide religious legitimacy through and for the Abraham Accords?

To address the research questions, this paper is grounded in a constructivist lens, as it provides a more natural theoretical foundation for the research on religion than the other paradigms in International Relations (IR) studies (Haynes, 2014). This is due to the constructivist main assumption that reality is not inherent and static but rather socially constructed through interaction and interpretation between actors. Hence, it indicates that non-material aspects, such as identity and religion, also influence the international system.

Based on the constructivist perspective, this paper refers to the concepts of religious identity and religious legitimacy. The concept of religious identity is initially introduced as a subject of analysis in IR studies in Alexandre Wendt's book 'Social Theory of International Politics'. Wendt (1999) identifies four kinds of identity: personal and/or corporate, type, role, and collective identity. Specifically, Wendt's 'type' identity is defined as an identity that is formed through historical connections of socio-cultural features such as ideology, customs, values, as well as religion (Margareth et al., 2017). Therefore, it is possible to conclude that religion may likewise become a source of state identity.

Dark (2000), therefore, advanced the discourse and stated that religion is surely a source of identity, both individually and communally. It shows that religion—which was just a spiritual identity—has evolved into a social identity through its integration with socio-cultural attributes. As a result, society forms a shared identity, which operates under common religion-based normative principles. This shared identity would then be

institutionalized as the state's religious identity.

Next, the concept of religious legitimacy is rooted in political legitimacy as introduced by Hurd (1999). Hurd (1999) defines legitimacy as actors' normative beliefs on an institution and its policies. According to Fox (1999), religion is a source of legitimacy and is perhaps becoming one of its most important aspects. He then referred to this concept as religious legitimacy. In examining religious legitimacy, Fox and Sandler (2004) utilized these 3 concepts: normative power, instrumentalism, and primordialism.

First, although international politics is indeed a power-driven system, normative elements in fact continue to influence the policy-making process. This is due to the existence of international norms—which are widely accepted by the international community—which pushes governments to adhere to them. In this sense, Resen (2024) argued that religion serves as the foundation of those norms. Consequently, in order to gain religious legitimacy, governments would connect their policies to religious norms, even when they have no conviction in religion. This is crucial in constructing a narrative that their policy is in line with religious norms (Fox & Sandler, 2004).

Second, instrumentalism also provides a conceptual analysis to examine religious legitimacy. Instrumentalism posits that identity and culture are tools for the government in achieving its goals. As we previously mentioned that religion is connected to identity and culture, and religion is possibly also a tool to legitimize a regime and its policies. According to the instrumentalist perspective, religious legitimacy can be achieved in two ways. Governments can cite religious verses that are specifically in line with their policies or reinterpret religious teaching to justify their policies (Fox & Sandler, 2004).

Third, unlike instrumentalists' views on religion as a political tool, primordialism argues that religion is an inherent aspect of society, which serves as a social force. Consequently, religion has the power to influence actors' behavior. In this case, Fox and Sandler (2004) argue that religion influences society through the existence of religious narratives, including religious prophecy. Therefore, religious legitimacy becomes important as religion is inherent to society.

To examine these theoretical claims, this paper employs interpretive-qualitative research methods. Wiesner (2022) defined interpretive-qualitative research as a method that seeks to explore and analyze phenomena through an understanding that social reality is subjectively constructed. Interpretive-qualitative research differs from mere qualitative research, which also employs an interpretive approach but tends to focus solely on the tangible dimension of social phenomena. Conversely, interpretive-qualitative methods address both the intangible and tangible dimensions of social phenomena, such as symbols, languages, meanings, etc. Therefore, this research methodology enables a multi-method approach for data collection and analysis—document, discourse, and narrative analysis—in examining the multifaceted religious identity construction and religious legitimacy of the Abraham Accords.

Data were collected from both primary and secondary sources. Primary sources were obtained from the official document of the Israel-UAE Abraham Accords, as well as official governmental transcripts. Secondary sources were obtained from various literature, such as journal articles, books, reports, and other scholarly publications. Data were curated using a cross-reference technique to ensure data validity and were analyzed with an interpretive technique.

Lastly, the data are presented descriptively in three main sections. The first examines the construction of a shared religious identity by both countries. The second analyzes the quest of religious legitimacy within the Israel-UAE normalization agreement. The third explores the broader interests of Israel and the UAE through the Abraham Accords.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Religious identity construction through the Abraham Accords

The normalization agreement between the UAE and Israel is a clear example of the role of religious identity in international politics. This is tangible through the existence of the Abraham Accords as a product of shared identity between Israel and the UAE. However, before examining Israel-UAE's efforts in constructing their religious identity, we will first analyze the type of identity that both countries seek to construct.

Through the Abraham Accords, the UAE and Israel seek to highlight their shared identity as Abrahamic religion adherents. Abrahamic identity is classified as Wendt's (1999) 'type' identity, which is derived from the historical connection of both nations' socio-cultural characteristics. In this case, the UAE and Israel's shared identity originates from their religious connection.

The term 'Abrahamic religion' refers to monotheistic religions that originated across the Middle East and West Asia. Three major religions categorized as Abrahamic religions are Judaism, Islam, and Christianity (Goodin, 2020). The categorization as Abrahamic religion is based on the claim that those religions have their roots in the same figure, which is Abraham or Ibrahim in Arabic (Guzansky & Winter, 2020a).

In Jewish tradition, Abraham is the ancestor of the Israelites and is regarded as the 'Father of all nations.' Furthermore, they believe that Judaism, as a religion, emerged when Abraham was chosen by God to rule the Israelites (Tohme, 2022). Abraham, on the other hand, is regarded by both Muslims and Christians as one of the major prophets as well as the predecessor of later prophets. Therefore, Abraham is recognized as an important figure in the history of the three Abrahamic religions (Karman, 2019).

Despite sharing identical views on Abraham, relations between the three Abrahamic religions have been complex in nature. One of the earliest theological debates was about Abraham's children, Isaac and Ishmael. Both Jews and Christians recognize Isaac as the legitimate son, especially because his lineage became the people of Israel, including Jesus as the God of Christians. Conversely, the Muslims recognize Ishmael, whose descendants settled in the Arabian Peninsula (deClaissé-Walford, 2019; Hanock & Putrawan, 2022).

Theological debates between Abrahamic religions, especially between the Jews and Muslims, later influenced the social-political relations of their followers. Throughout history, there were several periods when Jews and Muslims lived peacefully. However, there were also conflictual periods which were characterized by war, slavery, persecution, and other forms of discrimination. In the modern era, their conflict has escalated since the establishment of the state of Israel, which was rejected by Arab countries (Winter, 2023).

Israel is the only Jewish state in the world, where Jewish people constitute around 73.9% of its population (Even, 2021). On the other hand, Muslims constitute around 76.9% of the UAE's population (U.S. Department of State, 2022). Considering the theological differences between Islam and Judaism, which subsequently manifested in social-political conflicts of its followers, Israel and the UAE have been working to find a middle ground between the two religions. In this sense, Abraham, as a highly revered figure in both religions, is used as the basis of shared identity construction.

In order to construct an Abrahamic identity, Israel and the UAE centralized their peace agreement on the figure of Abraham. This identity construction can be examined from the official document of the Abraham Accords. It includes the following statement that highlights the shared Abrahamic identity:

"Recognizing that the Arab and Jewish people are descendants of a common ancestor, Abraham, and inspired, in that spirit, to foster in the Middle East a reality in which

Muslims, Jews, Christians, and peoples of all faiths, denominations, beliefs and nationalities live in, and are committed to, a spirit of co-existence, mutual understanding and mutual respect” (U.S. Department of State, 2020, p. 1).

Through the statement, both countries explicitly acknowledge their commonality as Abraham's descendants. Therefore, notwithstanding any theological differences, both Jews and Muslims share a common identity as an Abrahamic religion. In this case, the shared Abrahamic identity would therefore serve as the religious foundation of the Israel-UAE normalization agreement.

Furthermore, the statement also includes the juxtaposition of ‘*Arab and Jewish people*’ and ‘*Muslims, Jews, Christians*’ in one phrase. Elman and Shams (2022) argued that the juxtaposition showed mutual recognition of respective identities as equals. Therefore, we further argue that this recognition is essential in order to construct the Abraham Accords as an inclusive agreement that bridges Abrahamic religions and would potentially end the conflictual periods between them.

In conclusion, the construction of Abrahamic identity by Israel and the UAE shows the importance and relevance of religious identity in international conflict resolution. This is in line with Dark’s (2000) argument that when conflicting parties seek to use religious identity as a tool for peace, they would emphasize their commonalities over their differences. For this reason, it is clear that Israel and the UAE use their shared religious identity as the basis of their peace agreement.

### **The quest for the Abraham Accords’ religious legitimacy**

Most of the conflicts in the Middle East are inextricably linked to religious sentiments, even when religion plays little to no role in the cause of the conflict. The most tangible proof is seen in the conflict between Israel and Arab countries, particularly Palestine, which is frequently linked to the ‘Jews versus Muslims’ sentiment. Consequently, the agreement between Israel as a Jewish state and the Muslim-majority UAE is highly contingent on religious legitimacy (Guzansky et al., 2021).

Referring to Fox and Sandler (2004), the use of religious legitimacy in the Abraham Accords can be examined through the concepts of normative power, instrumentalism, and primordialism. We found that both countries used normative power in providing initial religious legitimacy to the Abraham Accords. However, both governments have different strategies to strengthen the Abraham Accords’ religious legitimacy. On one hand, the UAE government employs instrumentalism primarily to secure domestic legitimacy. On the other hand, the Israeli government utilizes both primordialism and instrumentalism to pursue international legitimacy.

#### ***Shared strategy: Normative power***

The main assumption of normative power in examining religious legitimacy is that a government would link its policies with religious norms to provide legitimacy. The pre-existing Jews vs Muslims sentiment in Middle Eastern politics has pushed Israel and the UAE to also use religion as a counter-narrative. Therefore, both Israel and the UAE have to link the Abraham Accords with religious norms.

Considering the agreement between Jewish and Muslim states seems not to be in line with the pre-existing religious sentiments, Israel and the UAE then named their peace agreements after a figure that bridges the two religions, which is Abraham. The insertion of a religious figure, therefore, shows the distinction between the Abraham Accords with other peace agreements. Furthermore, the significance of religious motive in Israel-UAE’s peace agreement is strengthened by the fact that none of Israel’s past agreements with other Arab

nations were named with religious elements.

For example, the Camp David Accords between Israel and Egypt were named after a location where both countries' presidents first conducted negotiations in the United States (U.S. Office of the Historian, n.d.). Likewise, Hussein (2021) stated that the Wadi Araba Treaty between Israel and Jordan was named after the Wadi Araba valley where the peace agreement was signed. Therefore, in relation to the Abraham Accords, Israel and the UAE clearly seek to legitimize and justify their peace agreements through religious narratives (Khan & Shahzad, 2021)

Through the Abraham Accords, Israel and the UAE linked their peace agreement to religious norms of peace and reconciliation. The emphasis on religious norms in the Abraham Accords can be clearly seen in the statement:

“The Parties undertake to foster mutual understanding, respect, co-existence and a culture of peace between their societies in the spirit of their common ancestor, Abraham ... in the spheres of peace and stability, as a fundamental pillar of their relations and as a means for enhancing those spheres in the Middle East as a whole” (U.S. Department of State, 2020, p. 3).

According to the statement, the Abraham Accords was constructed and would operate in accordance with the Abrahamic religious norms. Additionally, it indicates that future cooperation between the two countries will be based on religious norms as well. This is important in constructing a narrative that both countries are committed to maintaining normative aspects in their relationship.

Furthermore, referring to Dark's (2000) argument, every religion in the world basically has its own teachings or norms of peace. In the Abraham Accords, this is demonstrated from the phrase “in the spirit of their common ancestor, Abraham,” which indicates that the Abrahamic religions also promote peace and reconciliation between people. Both countries' leaders reaffirmed this statement during the signing ceremony of the Abraham Accords. Mohammad Bin Zayed, the de facto president of the UAE, stated that peace is a fundamental concept in Islam and must be widely promoted. Similarly, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu then added that the Jews always desire peace (The White House, 2020). Thus, both statements emphasize that the Israel-UAE normalization agreement is in line with the Abrahamic religions' norms of peace.

#### ***The UAE's strategy: Instrumentalism***

The UAE's decision to normalize its relations with Israel has drawn significant criticism, especially from Muslim scholars, given the theological debates between Islam and Judaism. As Winter (2023) previously mentioned, the relations of Jews and Muslims have a lengthy history, marked by both peaceful and conflictual periods. Specifically, the two religions' adherents have a very dynamic relationship that changes depending on the region and the policies of its ruler. This complex relationship has resulted in varied attitudes of Muslims toward the Jews. Some chose to live side by side peacefully, while others chose war due to the pre-existing rivalry.

However, tensions between Muslims and Jews were escalated by the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948. Many perceived the move as unilateral and expressed concern over the future of Palestinians and other peoples in the region. Consequently, as religious sentiments intensified, some Muslim scholars recalled the long-standing rivalry between Muslims and Jews, which dates back to the times of the prophets. Religious sentiments have become more intense since the Israeli annexation of the Muslim-majority West Bank, which also causes the rise of anti-Semitic narratives and movements across the region and

contributes to tensions between Israel and Arab countries (Ulfat, 2024).

Based on the concept of instrumentalism, the UAE then used religion as a tool to legitimize its policies. This can be done through literal interpretation of specific verses that are in line with a policy and by reinterpreting religious teaching to fit political interest (Fox & Sandler, 2004). In legitimizing the Abraham Accords, the UAE involves its Islamic authorities, which are the General Authority for Islamic Affairs and Endowments, as well as the Emirates Fatwa Council.

Firstly, in response to criticism, the General Authority for Islamic Affairs and Endowments provided religious justification by citing Qur'anic verses. As Middle East Media Research Institute (MEMRI, 2020) reported, the authority cited Qur'an 8:61 "*If the enemy is inclined towards peace, make peace with them...*" followed by Qur'an 4:90 "*... So if they refrain from fighting you and offer you peace, then Allah does not permit you to harm them.*" This citation is done by Omar Habtoor Al Dar'i, executive director of Islamic Affairs, and was delivered by Al-Ittihad, a state-owned media company (MEMRI, 2020).

The aforementioned Qur'anic verses show the teaching for Muslims to make peace if the opposing party desires to make peace as well. These verses were then literally interpreted to legitimize the UAE-Israel peace agreement. In this sense, since the government of Israel is committed to restoring peace, the UAE is justified in normalizing its relations with Israel. This was reaffirmed by Mohammed Matar Salem al-Kaabi, chairman of the General Authority for Islamic Affairs and Endowments, who said that normalization with Israel doesn't contradict Islamic principles (Guzansky & Winter, 2020a).

Secondly, through the Emirates Fatwa Council, the Abraham Accords' religious legitimacy is constructed by interpreting the Islamic concept of Maslaha. In Islamic teachings, Maslaha is defined as common interest. In this sense, a normalization agreement with Israel is considered beneficial for a common interest. The council posits that the agreement is not just in line with religious principles but also serves to support the public's common interests in economics, politics, and security (Guzansky et al., 2021).

The Emirates Fatwa Council shared its view of the UAE-Israel peace agreement as Maslaha through Al-Bayan, which is also a state-owned media company. Sheikh Abdullah bin Bayyah, as the head of the council, stated that the Abraham Accords was initiated by the de facto President Mohammad Bin Zayed and had been examined from sharia and legal perspectives. This relies on the assumption that, as the head of state who assesses the public's common interest, President Bin Zayed has legitimate authority to make a policy. Therefore, the Emirates Fatwa Council categorized the decision to normalize relations with Israel as Maslaha (MEMRI, 2020).

### ***Israel's Strategy: Primordialism and Instrumentalist***

Unlike the UAE, Israel didn't face significant internal criticisms of its normalization agreement with the UAE. However, as Burdah (2024) stated, Israel has been widely criticized for its expansionist policies, including unlawful conduct toward Palestinians, which clearly contradict its commitment to peace and international law. Its critics extended beyond Islamic communities and pro-Palestinian groups to include segments of the global Jewish diaspora, particularly in the United States. There are 93 rabbinical students, for example, who have urged the US government to halt its support for Israel (Tracy, 2021). Not to mention, strong opposition among publics in Muslim-majority countries might hinder Israel's efforts to expand normalization, as leaders remain attentive to domestic public opinion. Consequently, Israel had the urgency to strengthen its public support and to legitimize its policies.

In response, we find that Israel used the concepts of primordialism and instrumentalism in different ways to provide religious legitimacy for the agreement, with the ultimate goal of securing political support. Primordialist narratives are used to gain

legitimacy from its diaspora, while the instrumentalist approach was used to gain legitimacy from the international public, including Muslim countries. We will first explore the use of primordialism.

Israel connects the Abraham Accords to primordial sentiments of the Jewish people, particularly the recognition of Jewish identity. The Jewish people are an ethno-religious group whose ethnic identity is directly correlated to their religious identity. Throughout history, Jews have experienced lengthy periods of exile and occupation. The Torah recorded that Jews—referred to as the Israelites—were exiled to Assyria, Babylon, and Egypt at different timelines. Additionally, they underwent periods of occupation by Greece, Rome, and Persia/Media (Tabile, 2022).

During those periods, the Israelites faced multiple ethnic cleansing attempts and were forced to assimilate the culture of the ruling empires. Furthermore, it marked the early spread of the Jewish diaspora throughout regions across the world. As a result, the prolonged occupation and exile have caused an identity crisis among the Israelites. Therefore, as Werczberger and Monterescu (2024) stated, it influenced the Israelites' struggle for legitimacy and recognition of their identity.

In the modern era, the biggest disaster in Jews' history happened during the Holocaust, when the German Nazis targeted the Jewish diaspora in Europe as a subject of a mass genocide. Several European countries, particularly the United Kingdom, then initiated the repatriation of Jewish diaspora to the Middle East and backed the establishment of Israel as their homeland (Willasey-Wilsey, 2020). Shortly after, in addition to opposing Israel's sovereignty, Arab countries rejected Israel's Jewish identity since they were viewed as a postcolonial product instead of an actual indigenous Middle Eastern group (Winter, 2023).

The Arab countries' great rejection of the establishment of the state of Israel then escalated into years of military conflicts. Enduring both the Six-Day and Yom Kippur wars, Israel was able to restore its ties with some Arab countries. Normalization with Arab countries means great milestones for Israel, as it would further the recognition of its sovereignty in the Middle East. Furthermore, normalization serves as a tool to legitimize Israel's Jewish Identity. This is evident from the Israel-UAE agreement that advances the Jews' centuries-long quest for legitimacy (Guzansky & Winter, 2020b).

Firstly, the Abraham Accords recognize the Jewish people as a nation, not merely as a religious group (Zalberg, 2021). It is explicitly stated in this statement:

“Recognizing that the Arab and Jewish peoples are descendants of a common ancestor, Abraham, and inspired, in that spirit, to foster in the Middle East a reality in which Muslims, Jews, Christians and peoples of all faiths, denominations, beliefs and nationalities live in, and are committed to, a spirit of coexistence, mutual understanding and mutual respect” (U.S. Department of State, 2020, p. 1).

The statement emphasizes the historical association between the Jewish people and Abraham, who indisputably originate from the Middle East. This recognition is crucial and serves as a counter-narrative to prevailing sentiments that reject Jewish indigeneity in the Middle East. Moreover, such recognition is important for the Jewish people as it would finally bridge them with the Muslims and the whole Middle Eastern group.

Secondly, Benjamin Netanyahu has also reinforced this narrative in his speeches during the signing ceremony of the Abraham Accords at the White House. He stated that the Abraham Accords “*is not only a peace between leaders, it's a peace between peoples—Israelis, Emiratis and Bahrainis are already embracing one another*” and “*...to ensure the future of the one and only Jewish state*” (The White House, 2020). Moreover, he also emphasized Israel's

right to its homeland as historically justified and labelled Jerusalem as the eternal capital of Israel.

Netanyahu's statements show how Israel framed diplomatic normalization as grounded in historical belonging and in line with primordial narratives within Jewish tradition. The Torah recorded that even though the Jewish people had received God's blessing, they were destined to be scattered throughout the world. However, there is a prophecy that the Jewish people would finally return to their homeland. In this sense, after the establishment of Israel as a Jewish country, Zalzburg (2021) stated that the Israel-UAE agreement's recognition of Jewish identity alongside reconciliation with the Muslims has been considered prophecy fulfillment.

Although primordial narratives were indeed used to provide religious legitimacy to the agreement, Israel also used the instrumentalist approach for more strategic and practical purposes. For example, by connecting the Abraham Accords with Jewish identity as well as religious prophecy to gain legitimacy from its diaspora, Israel could use it as greater political backing, given the high number of Jewish descents in prominent political positions in many countries, particularly in the United States. This is reaffirmed by Feferman (2021) that Israel, through the Abraham Accords, has strengthened the sense of belonging of its diaspora, who have also been struggling for the recognition of their Jewish identity.

Furthermore, linking back to the Israel-Palestine conflict, the construction of religious legitimacy can help divert the focus of public discourse. This is because the religious dimension has become the central focus of media coverage and public attention, which was further reinforced by political leaders, thereby shaping dominant narratives around the Abraham Accords (Fikrie et al., 2022). Consequently, Vakil and Quilliam (2023) stated that the framing of the Abraham Accords as politically and economically beneficial for Arab countries and Israel's relationship, as well as its connection to religious values, has effectively sidelined the Palestinian issue. In this way, Israel not only has leveraged religious legitimacy to advance a primordial narrative, but also strategically shaped public opinion to reframe the Palestinian issue in line with its political interests.

Lastly, similar to the UAE, framing the normalization as reconciliation among Abraham's descendants also helps reduce opposition from Muslim-majority societies. In this context, Israel needs religious legitimacy to advance its normalization agenda. As Guzansky and Winter (2020a) explain, Middle Eastern Arab countries are divided into two main proxies regarding normalization with Israel. The UAE, Jordan, and Egypt tend to prioritize strategic interests and are more inclined toward normalization, while Iran and Türkiye tend to be more conservative and reject such normalization. By aligning the Abraham Accords with primordialist sentiment, in which the Jewish people are positioned as indigenous to the Middle East and as part of the Abrahamic religion, Israel would like to consolidate support for the pro-normalization proxy. This argument is supported by the findings of Fikrie et al. (2022), which show that the majority of public opinion supported the UAE-Israel normalization. This is significant, as strong public support provides governments with greater legitimacy and political support to advance normalization efforts. At the end, gaining more religious legitimacy would give Israel greater political backing, especially for expanding normalization.

### **The greater interest of Israel and the UAE**

We have examined Israel-UAE's efforts and interests in constructing their shared Abrahamic identity as well as in legitimizing the Abraham Accords. But we also found that both countries have further interests through the Abraham Accords that warrant further analysis, otherwise, it would leave a critical gap in this article. These interests, however, are still connected with identity and religious aspects.

The UAE, for instance, seeks to strengthen its soft power by projecting a moderate Muslim country identity. There are two major factors that influence the UAE to construct a moderate identity. First, the UAE sees itself as the leader of Islamic countries that is responsible for safeguarding and improving the international community's positive perception on Islam. The UAE's intentions are to counter Islamic extremism and promote a moderate version of Islam in response to the growing number of Islamophobic narratives. (Ozgen & Hassan, 2021). Second, through its moderate identity, the UAE is able to maintain and develop closer ties with Western countries. Economically, Kourgiotis (2021) notes that this moderate identity supports the UAE's access to Western markets, while politically, Elatriss and Amin (2026) add that it facilitates security alignment with Western countries. Third, this moderate identity contributes to the UAE's tourism development by reinforcing its image as a tolerant and globally open destination (Khalish et al., 2025).

The moderate Muslim identity has been constructed by the UAE government since the 2000s and has been one of its top national priorities. As a means to convey its moderate identity, the UAE government has established the Ministry of Tolerance, the International Tolerance Institute, and the National Research Project on Tolerance. Moreover, the UAE government declared and celebrated 2019 as the Year of Tolerance (Baycar & Rakipoglu, 2022). The UAE government also utilized symbolic politics by building the Abrahamic Family House, a religious complex that includes a mosque, church, and synagogue (Salman, 2026).

Furthermore, the UAE's most visible trademark in projecting its moderate identity is by conducting global interfaith dialogues. In recent years, the UAE has frequently hosted interfaith dialogues that promote the spirit of coexistence, particularly for Abrahamic religions. One of its most notable events is the Global Conference on Human Fraternity in 2019, which was held in Abu Dhabi. The conference facilitated a meeting between the late Pope Francis and Ahmad el-Tayeb, the Grand Imam of Al Azhar, and came up with the Document on Human Fraternity (Kourgiotis, 2020).

In relation to the Abraham Accords, the UAE further reaffirmed its identity as a moderate country. It is demonstrated by the recognition of Jewish identity that shows UAE's commitment to plurality. Additionally, it also includes Israel-UAE's commitment to intensified interfaith dialogues and other intercultural initiatives. This shows that the UAE seeks to promote a narrative that Islam is committed to peace and tolerance. Therefore, the Abraham Accords is a tool for the UAE to project its moderate identity and to emphasize its role as a global leader of religious freedom.

On the other hand, Israel assumes greater responsibility in advocating for broader international recognition of Jewish identity. We have mentioned that the Israel-UAE agreement provides official recognition of Israel's Jewish identity. However, there were noticeable attempts to extend this recognition beyond bilateral relations to regional and eventually international scales. With broader recognition of the Jewish identity, Israel seeks to counter anti-Semitism and to further empower the global Jewish community.

Israel's concern stems from the rise of anti-Semitic narratives and movements, particularly in the Middle East, that continuously hold back Israel's goal of international legitimacy towards Jewish identity. These anti-Semitic sentiments are not merely manifested at the grassroots level, but also through anti-Semitic policies (Rensmann, 2020). Consequently, the Jewish people in many countries often feel marginalized when publicly expressing their identity in addition to having lesser freedom of speech compared to other groups (Elman, 2020; Frantzman, 2021).

In achieving its goal, Israel brings together the Abraham Accords' signatories to combat anti-Semitism. Following the Abraham Accords, Elman and Shams (2022) outlined three notable initiatives undertaken by these countries. First, Bahrain and Morocco have adopted

the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance's (IHRA) definition of anti-Semitism in order to identify and deal with anti-Semitic practices. Second, in the educational curriculum context, Morocco has agreed to replace anti-Semitism and anti-Israel propaganda with Jewish history courses. Third, the Abraham Accords' signatories, including the UAE and Sudan, also committed to further arranging seminars, exhibitions, multicultural forums, and inclusive dialogues to promote coexistence and plurality. In conclusion, the Abraham Accords between Israel and Arab countries has positively contributed, or at the very least has acted as a stepping stone to empower the global Jewish community.

## CONCLUSION

The Israel-UAE normalization agreement was a shocking maneuver given the political complexities in the Middle East. It was shaped not only by political and economic interests but also by significant religious dimensions. Both countries constructed a shared religious identity by identifying themselves as fellow adherents of the Abrahamic faiths and naming their agreement after Abraham, whilst emphasizing religious commonalities throughout the text. To legitimize the Abraham Accords, they grounded the agreement in Abrahamic teachings on peace and reconciliation, with the UAE seeking domestic legitimacy by citing religious verses and involving religious authorities, and Israel linking the accords to Jewish identity for strategic international legitimacy. Beyond legitimization, the UAE leveraged this normalization to project itself as a moderate Islamic state in order to deepen ties with the West. At the same time, Israel utilizes the Abraham Accords to fight anti-Semitic sentiments in other countries to empower the global Jewish community.

In conclusion, this paper has examined the construction of religious identity and legitimacy by Israel and the UAE in the early periods of their normalization. For further research, we suggest that readers examine the impact or effectiveness of these identity and legitimacy constructions in influencing public opinion towards the agreement; does it positively or negatively contribute to the legitimacy of the agreement? Furthermore, it is interesting to further explore if the use of religious narratives in Israel-UAE relations is still relevant, especially given the escalating Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

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