

THE ABRAHAM ACCORDS AND PEACE IN THE MIDDLE EAST: REGIONAL RECEPTION AND IMPLICATIONS

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ABSTRACT

The normalization of ties between Israel and four Arab countries (Bahrain, Morocco, the United Arab Emirates, and Sudan) starting in 2020 through the US-facilitated Abraham Accords opened a new paradigm of peace in the greater Middle East and North African region. Optimists embrace the Accords as the harbinger of a new era of Israel-Arab relations and a renewed opportunity for peace in the region. Others consider them as mere official pronouncements by involved parties and without regard to the urgent and long-standing Israeli-Palestinian conflict. This paper argues that the Abraham Accords are based solely on the national interests of the signatories and the facilitator, the United States, and not primarily intended for restoring Israel-Arab ties and regional peace and security. This paper begins by examining the prospects and challenges of peacebuilding in the Middle East. The discussion proceeds to the pragmatism of the Abraham Accords, i.e., its strategic advantages for the signatories and the U.S. Finally, the paper briefly explores the reception of relevant actors in the Middle East and the wider Asian region, particularly Saudi Arabia, Iran, Turkey, and China.

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المخلص

لقد فتح تطبيع العلاقات بين إسرائيل وأربع دول عربية (البحرين والمغرب والإمارات العربية المتحدة والسودان) ابتداءً من عام ٢٠٢٠ من خلال اتفاقات إبراهيم التي يسرّتها الولايات المتحدة نموذجًا جديدًا للسلام في منطقة الشرق الأوسط الكبير وشمال أفريقيا. يتبنى المتفائلون الاتفاقات باعتبارها نذيرًا بعهد جديد من العلاقات الإسرائيلية العربية وفرصة متجددة للسلام في المنطقة. في حين يعتبرها آخرون مجرد تصريحات رسمية من قبل الأطراف المعنية ودون اعتبار للصراع الإسرائيلي الفلسطيني الملح والطويل الأمد. وترى هذه الورقة أن اتفاقات أبراهام تستند فقط إلى المصالح الوطنية للأطراف الموقعة والوسيط، الولايات المتحدة، ولا تهدف في المقام الأول إلى استعادة العلاقات الإسرائيلية العربية والسلام والأمن الإقليميين. تبدأ هذه الورقة بدراسة آفاق وتحديات بناء السلام في الشرق الأوسط. وتنتقل المناقشة إلى براغماتية اتفاقات أبراهام، أي مزاياها الاستراتيجية للموقعين والولايات المتحدة. وأخيرًا، تستكشف الورقة بإيجاز استقبال الجهات الفاعلة ذات الصلة في الشرق الأوسط والمنطقة الآسيوية الأوسع، ولا سيما المملكة العربية السعودية وإيران وتركيا والصين.

INTRODUCTION

Throughout most of human history, realism dominated relationships among state actors. As human civilizations advanced, the ideas of interdependence and multipolarity have been added to the lexicon of international relations. The determination to create and maintain international peace and security became the norm. Nations worldwide ideally

cooperate to maintain relative peace and security among themselves. However, it is also natural for men to cooperate for mutual interests while competing to advance their self-interests. Classical realist scholars of international politics widely accept this assumption. Peace and security create the conditions that foster positive growth and sustainable development for any nation. As nations realize that a comprehensive approach to peace will empower all parties and bring them significant economic and political incentives, international organizations, institutions, and regimes are created to manage inter-state relations. Hence, such an approach allows all parties to grow and develop while at the same time maintaining their own identity within a multicultural community.

Indeed, sustaining dialogue to find common areas of cooperation could be a long and tedious process and, in some cases, comes with the cost of sacrificing lives and properties. When shared interests are realized, mutual recognition and cooperation in resolving crises may be easily facilitated. However, when parties in conflict hold opposing narratives and refuse to accommodate each other, the conflict will endure, and political promises delivered for future cooperation will be superficial. In this case, conflict intensifies between parties, and an external power favoring one side of the dispute emerges. This explanation summarizes the nature of Israel-Arab relations and the involvement of external parties in the conflict.

The Middle East is globally interconnected. Military conflicts between regional and extra-regional players have plagued the region for decades. This has many causes. International trade and business rely on the region's crude oil and gas reserves and important routes. Christianity, Judaism, and Islam originated in the region, which is the home of civilization. Arabs, Persians, Turks, Jews, and Kurds coexist in the region despite shared features. The area also suffers from the "curse," or inability to establish democratic institutions and make peace with Israel. Energy resources in most Arab countries contributed to this curse since oil profits armed them with powerful weapons since the late 1960s.

The search for peace and development in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region has been the epicenter of Arab and non-Arab regional initiatives for several decades already. However, there remain some historical and political hindrances to achieving regional peace. First, it can be assumed that the fragile nature of peace and security in the region is a by-product of the divide-and-rule policy of nineteenth-century European powers who had occupied, disturbed, and exploited the region. The European powers expanded and colonized territories in Asia and Africa to build and strengthen their empires. These colonies were either rich in natural or human resources or possessed strategic value to maritime and land routes necessary for the expansion of European imperialism at the time. The sad realities associated with European colonialism and imperialism created division and social fragmentation among the MENA people throughout the centuries.

Second, the fragile peace and security environment of the region, particularly in light of the Israeli-Arab and Israeli-Palestinian issues, can also be assumed to be an outcome of the United Nations General Assembly (G.A.) Resolution 181 of November 29, 1947, by which the partition of Palestine into two states, one Arab and one Jewish, was decided (U.N., n.d.). This resolution, which the Arabs did not accept, created the State of Israel and resulted in a perennial state of catastrophe, as demonstrated by the Arab-Israeli Wars. It is worth noting that the creation of the new State of Israel at that time contributed to the displacement of thousands of Palestinians from their homeland who became refugees in the neighboring countries of Egypt, Jordan, and Syria. Thus, when one speaks about the prospects of peace between Israelis and Palestinians and Israel and Arab countries, it is critical to investigate several issues that prevent the establishment of peace.

An important issue is the return of Palestinian refugees to their homeland. The United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) estimated that more than 1.5 million Palestinian individuals live in 58 recognized

Palestinian camps located in Jordan, Lebanon, the Syrian Arab Republic, the Gaza Strip, and the West Bank, including East Jerusalem. Palestinian refugees are defined as individuals who usually resided in Palestine “during the period 1 June 1946 to 15 May 1948, and who lost both home and means of livelihood as a result of the 1948 conflict” (UNRWA, n.d., para. 1). The issue of their right to return, if addressed, will partly determine the future direction of the relationship between Israel and Palestine and between Israel and Arab and Islamic countries. Hence, it is logical to argue that without addressing this issue—along with other concerns like the future of the Palestinian state and the Palestinians’ right to food, water, and mobility—a concrete peace agenda would remain an illusion. This is the case for the Abraham Accords.

Israel's ongoing acquisition and occupation of Palestinian areas exacerbates the right-to-return issue. Meanwhile, Hamas, a violent nationalist group seeking to build an independent Islamic state in Palestine, sends rockets to Israel, prolonging its tug-of-war at the expense of civilians. Israel's illegal occupation of Palestinian areas hinders peace talks. It is the main reason Arabs haven't had relations with Israel for decades. Despite international condemnation, Israeli forces continue to abuse and marginalize Palestinians, especially those in the Gaza Strip, by denying them water, food, decent shelter, health care, and mobility. After Israel cut water supplies before its November 2023 war in Gaza, U.N. officials said millions of Palestinians face “dehydration and are at risk of waterborne disease” (Wilson et al., 2023, para. 1).

The Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) divides Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza Strip to weaken them through divide-and-rule. According to the Israeli government, Hamas's rocket assaults from Gaza target Israel's interests and hurt its residents. Israel emphasizes Hamas's refusal to negotiate peace, compelling it to maintain its position while violating Palestinian rights. The international community admires the Palestinians' will to struggle for their homeland despite their dangerous circumstances. Large powers have failed to act on the universal recognition that Palestinians are human and have the right to self-determination. Confrontation arises due to the issue's complex values and interests. Many believe that peace brokers—mainly the U.S. and U.K.—have never forced Israel to end its occupation of Palestinian territories. They merely handle conflict and don't seek durable solutions. The involvement and double standard of parties on the ground who call for peace yet act in violence hinder the peace process, extending the worst-case scenario for innocent Palestinians.

These realities lead us to the sound assumption that the region's security challenges could have direct or indirect implications on global peace and stability. Therefore, it is only practical to regard the region in our policy formulation and academic inquiries. It is an essential region in studying international security, international geopolitics, and international political economy. As mentioned earlier, the region has constantly been subjected to controversies: the series of Israeli-Arab wars (1948–49, 1956, 1967, 1973, 1982, and 2006), the Iran-Iraq War (1980–1988), the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, and the eventual Persian Gulf War (1991). In recent years, we witnessed the proliferation of several non-state actors, such as Al-Qaeda, Hamas, and ISIS, whose interests destabilize the already fragile peace. We also heard about the Arab Spring, which forced regional countries to rethink their socio-economic policies and address the ballooning issues confronting the youth, i.e., unemployment and aspirations for more freedom. The uprisings started with the self-immolation of a frustrated 26-year-old graduate in Tunisia following the police's confiscation of his fruits and vegetables that he reportedly sold without a permit. This triggered anti-government and pro-democracy protests across the MENA region (Lageman, 2020).

These events have shaped and continue to reshape the geopolitical and security structure of the Middle East. An inclusive and functional mechanism is necessary to address regional challenges effectively. It would require a new paradigm that could break the old

and dysfunctional arrangements for peace and development. Although several peace initiatives have been laid down in the past decades, the expected outcomes have yet to materialize. The ideal paradigm will require a strategy that balances national and collective interests; an approach to development that is inclusive and based on mutual respect and peaceful co-existence; a mechanism that guarantees an open line of communication for all actors involved; a consensus to uphold international laws and conventions; and finally, engagement in areas beyond politics such as economy and trade, technology, and people-to-people initiatives. Hence, this paradigm's keywords are cooperation, recognition, respect, and trust.

For these reasons, the Israeli government decided to normalize bilateral ties with the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Bahrain, Morocco, and Sudan to open avenues for dialogue and cooperation. The intention was to create material and financial opportunities for all sides and to foster understanding among the three major religious groupings in the region. After all, Abraham is the common ancestor of the three monotheistic religions of Islam, Christianity, and Judaism.

DISCUSSION

The Pragmatism of the Abraham Accords

Several policymakers and commentators welcomed the signing of the Abraham Accords on September 15, 2020, between Israel and the UAE and Israel and Bahrain. They believed the Accords would open a new chapter of hope after seven decades of absence of complete, official diplomatic relations between Israel and these Arab nations. As described by the UAE's Minister of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, His Highness Sheikh Abdullah bin Zayed Al Nahyan, the Abraham Accords are intended to change the geopolitical environment of the Middle East "from war to peace, from terrorism to economic cooperation, from a discourse of violence and extremism to a dialogue of tolerance and cultural curiosity" (as cited in Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Israel, 2022, para. 31). Al Nahyan believes that "diplomacy and communication would promote greater stability, prosperity, and hope" for the UAE and Israel (as cited in Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the UAE, 2022, para. 5). For Israel and Bahrain, represented by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Foreign Minister Abdullatif Al Zayani respectively, signing the Accords is a way to secure a peaceful and prosperous future for their countries and the region (Abraham Accords, 2020). It is worth noting that both agreements nominally cite "enduring resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict" as a critical goal for peacebuilding in the region.

Supporters believed that the Accords approach peace beyond the issue of Palestinian statehood and the occupation of Palestinian lands, which dominated the discussions in the last seven decades and prevented Arab countries from normalizing ties with Israel. There seems to be an acknowledgment from the signatories that the new Middle East needs to overcome its historical imprisonment and that normalization of relations with Israel is the best alternative moving forward. This marks the first time that small Gulf countries that were neither physically involved in the seven Arab-Israeli wars between 1948 and 2006 nor shared Israel's borders entered a peace deal with Israel. It shows "the changing regional dynamics" where peripheral Arab players (including possibly Muslim countries in Asia and Africa) also play a significant geopolitical role in the region (Yossef, 2021). It is the third case of "normalization between Israel and its Arab neighbors (following Egypt in 1979 and Jordan in 1994) and embodies a rare renunciation of hostilities in the conflict-torn Middle East" (Yossef, 2021, p. 3). Hence, from the supporters' perspective, the Accords are a historic initiative and a precursor to a more significant regional peace initiative.

Upon initial observation, the Abraham Accords signal some pragmatic foreign policy shift for Israel and these Arab countries. For the UAE, Israel is a strategic partner. As observed by Arab analyst Omar Rahman (2021), the UAE "holds Israel to be neither an enemy nor threat to regional stability" (p. 2). The Abraham Accords Peace Agreement

(2020) between them reaffirms that "the establishment of peace and full normalization between them can help transform the Middle East by spurring economic growth, enhancing technological innovation, and forging closer people-to-people relations" (para. 8).

In December 2021, the RAND Corporation and the Samuel Neaman Institute for National Policy Research projected that Israel would receive the most economic benefits in ten years, with USD46 billion, followed by the UAE at USD17 billion (Maital & Barzani, 2021). The UAE has prioritized technical investment and productive areas, offering the greatest economic potential among Arab signatories. An economic benefit of the Abraham Accords is the shortening of flight paths for businesspeople, cargo, and visitors from UAE airports to Tel Aviv and vice versa. According to Israeli Tourism Minister Orit Farkash-Hacohen, 50,000 Israeli tourists have visited the UAE since the Accords (McGinley, 2020). Israel hopes to lure 100,000 UAE tourists annually (Bloomberg, 2020). Without COVID-19, the target would have been higher. Field observers note that the historic Accords expanded bilateral cooperation into investment, innovation, food security, and health. A Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement was concluded, and others are pending. Israeli commerce with peace partners reached USD3.47 billion in 2022, up from USD1.905 billion in 2019 and USD593 million in 2019 (Greenway, 2023).

Israel-Bahrain ties' prospects are also good. Maital and Barzani (2021) anticipate that the Accords might create USD 1.6 billion in economic activity for Bahrain. Israel views Bahrain as a business hub. To achieve Bahrain's potential, Israeli firms will set up the hub to create jobs and share technology and know-how, according to Israeli envoy Eitan Na'eh. Israel will gain market access to Bahrain due to improved relations. Bahrain's health sector and Israel's food security and education will be leveraged. Tourism and cultural exchange between Israel, Bahrain, and the UAE are also promoted (Frantzman, 2023).

In terms of political gain, many analysts suggested that the Accords have cemented the security and political cooperation of the four Arab countries with Israel and the U.S. One of the main thrusts behind the agreement stems from the signatories' common security challenges (Pedro & Stein, 2021). Thus, beyond trade and people-to-people relations, there could be advantages in the security area, such as the coordination of responses to mutual security threats from other countries in the region. Maital and Barzani (2021) summarized the strategic considerations of the four Muslim countries in signing the US-brokered Accords:

The UAE sought advanced U.S. weapons, mainly F-35 aircraft. Bahrain sought U.S. support against an Iranian threat with tacit Saudi approval. Sudan sought its removal from the U.S. list of 'state-sponsored terrorism' list after 27 years, along with a World Bank aid package. Morocco also got formal recognition from the U.S. of Moroccan sovereignty in the disputed West Sahara. (p. 3)

From the Israeli perspective, the Accords are strategic in the sense that they could preserve Israel from Arab criticism and initiate a new opportunity for cooperation with Arab countries. Perhaps the political and strategic gains for Israel can be seen in five folds: 1) normalizing ties between Israel and the Arab states without an Israeli-Palestinian agreement; 2) strengthening strategic security cooperation with Arab countries (the UAE, Bahrain, Sudan, Morocco); 3) lessening Israel's regional isolation; 4) reducing Arab support and sympathy to the Palestinians and Hamas (an unpopular assumption); and finally, 5) encouraging other Arab and non-Arab Muslim and Asian countries to join the Accord, hence possibly welcoming collaboration between Israel and these countries. While the Accords are primarily intended to cater to the national interests of the countries involved, it also aims to send a strong, positive message to Arab countries that normalizing relations with Israel is crucial to achieving lasting peace and prosperity in the Middle East.

Positive reactions to the Abraham Accords could be considered part of Asian nations'

national interests because it gives them more chances to do business with the signatories. It might also streamline travel and business. Regional Asian power India supports the Abraham Accords. India considers Israel and the UAE key partners. India's alliance with these two countries may lead to trilateral commerce, investment, culture, defense, science, and technology. India and other Asian countries that send workers to the Gulf should support the full normalization of diplomatic relations between Israel and the UAE due to the enormous number of Indian workers in the Gulf, notably in the UAE. This includes major migrant-sending nations like the Philippines.

Although there are no public discussions about the Accords in the Philippines, there is optimism that it could create positive gains for the country's labor and tourism sectors as well as in terms of trade facilitation and technology transfer, innovation, and intelligence cooperation between the Philippines, the UAE, and Israel's relevant agencies. The Philippines may work on a strategic trilateral partnership with the UAE and Israel, Bahrain, and Israel, or a multilateral partnership with the US, Israel, UAE, or Bahrain in a wide range of interests in light of this regional development. Meanwhile, Muslim member states in ASEAN—namely Indonesia, Malaysia, and Brunei—expressed their strong reservations about the purpose and outcome of the Accords. They doubt that the Accords could address the foremost hurdle to regional peace.

The Abraham Accords and Relevant Regional Actors

Specific geopolitical nuances, however, may hinder the full implementation and success of the Accords. This includes the Palestinian exclusion in the peace agreement and the absence of regional powers Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey in the Accords, the recent Saudi-Iranian rapprochement, and finally, the ongoing Israeli war in Gaza.

It can be recalled that the Accords did not specifically mention the Palestinian element but focused on the national interests of the signatory countries, with U.S. President Donald Trump facilitating the rapprochement. The Palestinian leadership reacted to this normalization as “despicable” and a “betrayal” of the Palestinian struggle (Turak, 2020, para. 6). To speak of peace in the Middle Eastern region without the inclusion of the Palestinian element will make the vision for peace unattainable or unsustainable.

The Accords will not achieve peace in the region until Israel and the U.S. recognize the right of the Palestinian people to self-determination. In an article by a Turkish journalist in *Daily Sabah*, it is argued that while each party pursues its interests in the signed and planned peace agreements, they “will ultimately benefit the U.S. and Israel and ultimately harm Palestine” (Kaplan, 2020, para 5). This argument was reinforced by the 2021 incidents following the eviction of Palestinian families from their homes in the Sheikh Al-Jarrah neighborhood (McKernan, 2022), the tension in the al-Aqsa Mosques during the month of Ramadhan (Najib, 2023), and the last Hamas-Israel encounter in Gaza in the same year (Al Jazeera, 2022).

Although reports suggested that “Riyadh implicitly praised the deal by allowing Saudi journalists to write op-eds in support of the UAE and Bahrain,” Saudi Arabia remains a non-signatory to the Abraham Accords (Perper, 2020, para. 5). In a Bloomberg article, Saudi Arabia's Foreign Minister Prince Faisal bin Farhan al Saud said in the Aspen Security Forum that the Accords could be “viewed positively,” yet the “best way to build on that spirit is to find a path to solving the issue of the Palestinians and finding a path to a Palestinian state” (Wadhams, 2021, para. 2).

The 2002 Arab Peace Initiative is a reaffirmation of the June 1996 resolution of the Council of the League of Arab States in its 14th ordinary session, which recognized the importance of restoring peace through non-military and nonviolent ways. The Council listed priority steps to be implemented. Among these were to call attention to Israeli policies and reiterate that “just peace” is a “strategic option” for all. It called for the complete withdrawal of Israeli forces from the Palestinian territories they occupied since 1967; the full

implementation of the United Nations Security Council Resolution 242 and 338, particularly on the return of the Palestinian Refugees to their homeland; and the recognition of East Jerusalem as the capital of the future independent Palestinian state—these in exchange for the normalization of relations with Israel “in the context of a comprehensive peace” (para. 3).

Like the Arab Peace Initiative and other peacebuilding agreements in the region, Saudi Arabia’s leadership is a critical factor in the effective implementation and general success of any initiative for Palestine and Israel. The same is true for the recently concluded Abraham Accords. As Saudi Arabia maintains its dominance and influence in the Middle East region’s geopolitical, religious, and security landscapes, it is simply the missing link towards achieving the ultimate and ideal objective of the Abraham Accords. Saudi Arabia remains fully committed to the Arab Peace Initiative initiated by the late Saudi King Abdullah in 2002. Under Saudi regional leadership, Arabs could offer normalization with Israel, but first, it must withdraw from occupied Palestinian territories and recognize the future statehood of Palestine with Jerusalem as its capital.

With Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman in charge, will Saudi Arabia give up Palestinian statehood and restore relations with Israel? After Saudi Arabia reconciled with Iran, a Palestinian supporter, the solution remains difficult and will certainly remain so in the future. The rapprochement was facilitated by China, not the U.S. Understanding regional peace and security arrangements seems to depend on the two regional powers’ public bilateral rapprochement and China’s participation in Middle East power dynamics.

Saudi Arabia has shown regional leadership by inviting neighboring countries and political groups to debate disagreements, hoping to spark regional unity quietly. Arabia tried to bring Syria back to the Arab League after decades of estrangement. After Saudi King Salman invited Syrian President Bashar Assad to the 32nd Arab League Summit in Jeddah in May 2023, Syria reiterated its disinterest in diplomatic relations with Saudi Arabia. The invitation was made despite U.S. and U.K. objections (France 24, 2023). Saudi Arabia also invited Yemen’s Houthi rebel group to fly to the Kingdom to officially finish the year-long conflicts that destroyed and impoverished an Arab nation (Gambrell, 2023).

Like Saudi Arabia, Iran’s role in the future geopolitical and security direction of the region matters, given that its Islamic government has not recognized the legitimate existence of the State of Israel. Iran also opposes the normalization of relations between Israel and Arab countries under the Abraham Accords. Despite U.S. sanctions on Iran which aimed at paralyzing the power and influence of Iran in the Middle East, Iran remains an influential regional actor for various reasons: 1) its geostrategic location in the Gulf, which allows valuable access to the international movement of goods and people; 2) its vast energy reserves; 3) its young and extensive human resources; 4) its Shi’a ideology which it shares with other countries in the region; 5) its consistent policy vis-à-vis Israel; and 6) its mastery of regional and international affairs. Thus, Iran would continue to be a relevant actor in the region’s geopolitics and may directly or indirectly influence the strategic calculations of actors in the Middle East.

Unlike Saudi Arabia, which remains ambiguous about the Abraham Accords, the Iranian leadership suggests that the Abraham Accords are not what it officially claims to achieve. Islamic Iran’s position on the Accords is that they are designed to create threats for Iran through its Arab neighbors. The Iranian Islamic establishment has not recognized the legitimacy of the Israeli state since the Islamic revolution and sees the Israeli occupation of Palestinian territories as illegal and a violation of international laws and conventions. Aside from Israel, Islamic Iran also cut diplomatic ties with the South African apartheid regime until Nelson Mandela came to power in 1994. Iran supported South Africa against the apartheid regime and has since backed the African National Congress (ANC) (Gruzd, 2022). It must be noted that the regime change in Iran in 1979 from monarchy to Islamic theocracy had critically affected its bilateral political and economic relations with Israel. This is even

though prior to the Islamic revolution, the two countries demonstrated an excellent history of security and intelligence cooperation. Both countries were allied with the U.S. in the Cold War until the second half of the 1970s.

The Iranian Islamic Revolution that started in 1979 and continued through the 1980s called for Islamic solidarity against the occupying Israeli government in Palestinian territories. This government position continues to carry weight among the Iranian pro-Islamic regimes. Although Iran's initial plan to export its Shi'a ideology alerted the neighboring Arab regimes, it is an undeniable part of the history of the Islamic Ummah that Sunni and Shi'a Muslims anywhere in the world shared common sympathies to the plight of the Palestinian people. This shared affinity to one Islamic Ummah had strengthened their resolve to jointly call for Israel to stop its illegal occupation of Palestinian territories.

Another regional power that Israel needs to bring into the Accords is Turkey. Unlike Iran and Saudi Arabia, Turkey was the first Muslim-majority country to officially recognize the State of Israel in 1949 (Bahar, 2022). It has maintained trade and diplomatic ties with the State of Israel. However, relations soured since the 2010 Mavi Marmara incident, where Israeli commandos killed nine Turkish citizens aboard the ship that tried to bring humanitarian aid to the Gaza Strip ruled by Hamas (Gumrukcu & Butler, 2020). The limited effort from both sides in the past years after this incident saw constrained bilateral relations. Turkey's President Erdoğan criticized the signing of the Accords, citing his support for the Palestinians. Erdoğan even threatened to suspend diplomatic ties by withdrawing the Turkish Ambassador from its post in the UAE (Kartal, 2020; Gumrukcu & Butler, 2020).

However, this momentum was not sustained as Turkey and Israel found cooperating more practical than confronting each other. Hence, in August 2022, the two countries normalized their bilateral relations. According to Cook (2022), the reason why Turkey entered full-blast diplomatic relations with Israel is guided by two considerations. One is that by normalizing relations with Israel, Turkey can get assistance in lobbying in the U.S. for the purchase of F-16 fighters as well as addressing the issue of imports to Ankara. Second, the rapprochement has something to do with the discovery of natural gas in Israel in 2010, with the Turkish corridor being considered the best and most economically feasible route to export to Europe. Hence, economic pragmatism had a role in this bilateral diplomatic normalization (Cook, 2022). For Baldelli (2023), Turkish rapprochement with Israel can be seen as more on the "transactional" side. A recent development in Israel-Turkey relations is investment and economic cooperation in technology transfer and cybersecurity. The Turkish conglomerate Sabanci Group has seen an opportunity to invest in digital business in Israel. As reported, Sabanci acquired a 51 percent stake in Radiflow, an Israeli operational technology (O.T.) cybersecurity company that provides management solutions for protecting critical infrastructure (Wrobel, 2023).

CONCLUSION

Any peace agenda forged in the region must always be regarded within the context of overlapping historical, political, economic, and security variables. The Palestinian question has always dominated regional Middle Eastern peace initiatives. It has been the leading geopolitical discourse in the region involving not only Middle Eastern countries but also international powers such as the U.S. and Europe since the 1948 creation of Israel. Recently, a non-Western player entered the equation. China is increasingly visible in the region and gradually presents itself as a potential alternative to filling the regional power vacuum.

The complexity of actors and interests in Middle Eastern affairs nowadays creates a situation where the prospects for regional peace may become even more complicated to achieve than anticipated. Based on the parties' unique global, regional, and national perspectives, any agreement for peace between Israel and a few Arab countries may not necessarily be acceptable to all parties in the region and, hence, will only lead to

inconclusive results.

The Abraham Accords between Israel and three Arab countries in the MENA region, along with Israel's previous peace agreements with Egypt and Jordan, still do not guarantee the achievement of overall stability in the Middle East. Although the Abraham Accords promise to deliver material and financial gains for signatories, this does not immediately entail that other non-signatories will follow suit. Nor do they immediately invoke cooperation among the parties involved. The signing of an agreement is only the initial step. A more detailed process of restoring trust to initiate peace must follow.

There could be hurdles along the way in fully implementing the peace agreements. All agreeing parties must be genuinely and wholly committed to the agreed principles and provisions. Moreover, as presented above, implementing the Abraham Accords without critical players such as Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Turkey could only partially achieve its long-term target of regional peace. Its success and sustainability are still in question. For the region to experience stability and development, these regional powers must play the leading role. The recent Saudi-Iranian rapprochement is a good precedent of having two regional powers work toward regional dialogue and understanding.

The Abraham Accords are just one of the mechanisms to achieve this goal. Studying the text of the Accords will provide us with an initial observation that they are limited to addressing the gap between Israel and the Arab signatories and are not designed to address the impending regional problem for peace. Hence, it brings us to inquire how regional powers can make themselves comfortable with each other and start working for greater regional peace and development projects. Along with this, another inquiry will be how extra-regional powers such as the U.S. and China can help the peacebuilding process between antagonistic regional powers such as Saudi Arabia and Iran. Addressing these questions will require us to exhaust Middle East relations with the U.S. and China and American and Chinese regional ambitions and rivalries in the Middle East region.

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