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On August 13, 2020, the United States, Israel, and the United Arab Emirates issued a joint official announcement that Israel and the UAE would be embarking on a political process of full normalization of relations.¹ A month later, on September 11, Bahrain joined the Emiratis by announcing its intention to normalize relations with Israel, also facilitated by the US. The timing of the so-called Abraham Accords may have come as a total surprise to many; however, the formal announcements only serve to bring the incremental progress in bilateral relations between Israel and several Arab Gulf states since the turn of this century into plain view. Formalization of these prospective alliances makes complete sense as a “tacit security regime”² in light of shared and overlapping concerns—both regarding Iran and Islamic extremists and mounting uncertainties about future US strategy and engagement in the Middle East.³

Rooted in the post-Oslo 1990s, the Israel–UAE relationship was one of mutual concealment until the current shift toward institutional recognition. This upgraded relationship, in addition to normalization with Bahrain and burgeoning ties with other Gulf states such as Oman and Saudi Arabia, can best be described as the product of quiet diplomacy that has been taking place “just below the surface” for some years now.⁴ Pragmatic contacts and businesslike dealings have been developing progressively and in a number of sometimes overlapping tracks: security/intelligence, economics/trade, and, more recently, a public channel that includes