

ISSUE BRIEF

Pitching Abraham's Tent: The Human Dimension of UAE-Israeli Normalization

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Mission Statement

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Working Group Chair:Yoel Guzansky, *Institute for National Security Studies***Working Group Members:**

Shalom Lipner and Jonathan Ferziger, *Atlantic Council*
Sarah Feuer, Tomer Fadlon, and Ari Heistein, *Institute for National Security Studies*
Ebtesam Al Ketbi and Noura Al Breiki, *Emirates Policy Center*

Executive Summary

- ◆ People-to-people relations, over the long term, support more durable and expansive relationships between countries and thus strengthen peace agreements.
- ◆ Peace agreements between US partners in the Middle East serve as a force multiplier against actors who seek to destabilize the region. For this reason, among others, Washington should seek to ensure the success of normalization.
- ◆ Despite initial optimism and excitement, a number of challenges to creating meaningful people-to-people relationships between the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Bahrain, and Israel remain.
- ◆ The newly formed Israeli government has an opportunity to capitalize on the momentum of recent peace and normalization agreements with Arab nations and seek a similar agreement with Saudi Arabia, which would be a particular achievement given the kingdom's political, religious, and economic role in the region.

Introduction

In the past year, many scholars and former policy makers have written on the normalization of relations between Israel and Arab states, focusing on economic interests as a motivator for all parties and emphasizing shared security interests in the region. Case studies, however, go beyond political and strategic calculations and indicate that relations between countries are improved when they encompass aspects related to the lives of everyday citizens in these countries. Elements of soft power play an important role in improving relations not only between two countries but also between the peoples of those countries; citizens of countries do not always see the benefits of peace and instead associate the agreements with the interests of a small class of economic elites.

It is reasonable to ask why people-to-people connections are necessary for peace or normalization between two nations. History demonstrates that peaceful relations are possible even in the absence of extensive understanding between the populations of two countries: Israel's peace treaty with Egypt is an example of such an agreement, which—despite prevalent hostility toward Israel among the Egyptian population—has proved durable enough to survive for more than four decades and through several uprisings, continuing to serve as the basis for robust security cooperation.¹ But while people-to-people relations are not a prerequisite for sustaining limited cooperation over the short term, they do facilitate a more durable and expansive relationship between countries over the long term, and thus reinforce peace.

At present, the UAE-Israeli relationship stands on two key pillars. First, the countries have a shared security interest in promoting regional stability in the face of regional actors like Iran and Turkey. Second, the UAE and Israel have a shared economic interest in promoting the modernization of their societies—particularly high-tech sectors—through innovation and investment. Since interests wax and wane over time, however, the future of this bilateral relationship

may prove unpredictable or even erratic if overly dependent upon instrumental ties.

Incorporating an element of cultural affinity between countries, a dimension which is far less susceptible to abrupt transformation, can serve as a means to stabilize bilateral relations in the face of unforeseen challenges, shifts in regional dynamics, or changes in leadership.² The cultivation of personal attachments between the two peoples can serve as “shock absorbers” to mitigate obstacles to normalization that may arise on the political level. Washington also has a particular interest in cementing the long-term future of collaboration between Israel and the Gulf states: enhanced partnership will allow the United States to both invest in peace and reap its dividends, instead of constantly playing the role of mediator in the region. It will also advance the stated US aim of increased burden-sharing with Middle East allies.³

Conditions for this work are optimal. The countries' acceptance of religious diversity in a region that is often intolerant of such differences aligns both states with the United States in championing the principle of religious freedom.⁴ Cooperation between the diverse communities in Israel and the UAE can reinforce the societal value of tolerance, enriching both cultures and strengthening their cultural affinity with the United States.

The new Israeli government, headed by Prime Minister Naftali Bennett, has every incentive to roll up its sleeves and embrace this agenda. Sitting atop a fragile and heterogeneous coalition, Bennett will gravitate naturally toward issues of consensus with little risk of controversy or fallout. Normalization with the Arab world intersects comfortably with this thrust and could produce tangible gains for Bennett and his colleagues to display and deploy to garner public support. They will find that Israel's Arab partners are ready to advance as well. After weathering the Gaza crisis of May 2021—when hostilities did not manage to derail burgeoning ties between Israel and its new friends in the Arab world—regional leaders were quick to congratulate

1 “Egyptians View Israel as Most Hostile State, Poll Finds,” *Haaretz*, October 2, 2015, <https://www.haaretz.com/poll-egyptians-view-israel-as-most-hostile-state-1.5404247>.

2 Jacob Magid, “US suspends \$23 billion sale of F-35s to UAE that followed Abraham Accords,” *Times of Israel*, January 27, 2021, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/us-puts-hold-on-sale-of-f-35s-to-uae-that-followed-abraham-accords/>.

3 Kirsten Fontenrose, “How Joe Biden Hopes to Shift US Policy in the Middle East,” *National Interest*, January 31, 2021, <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/how-joe-biden-hopes-shift-us-policy-middle-east-177388>.

4 “The Biden Plan for Safeguarding America's Faith-Based Communities,” Biden-Harris: A Presidency for All Americans, accessed June 15, 2021, <https://joebiden.com/safeguarding-americas-faith-based-communities/>.

Bennett on the formation of his new cabinet and to welcome continued cooperation.⁵

This report examines three powerful drivers to bolster people-to-people connections: religious dialogue, sports, and higher education and research. (Other areas primed equally for bilateral interaction, but not discussed within the framework of this paper, include leadership development, tourism, the advancement of women, integration of disabled persons, and environmental activism.) These elements of soft power play an important role in the national life of both Israel and the UAE, holding the potential to improve relations not only between the two countries but also their peoples. This report will also address the obstacles—primarily political—to building and maintaining people-to-people relations, as well as the pivotal role of American leadership in ensuring the success of the process.

Drivers of Progress

Religion

The US Department of State heralded the normalization process between Israel and the UAE as a religious rapprochement between Muslims, Jews, and Christians.⁶ Its founding document was named the Abraham Accords, honoring the patriarch of the three monotheistic faiths. Parties, in announcing the deal, declared the “promotion of interfaith and intercultural dialogue to advance a culture of peace among the three Abrahamic religions and all humanity.”⁷ Official religious institutions and Muslim jurists in the UAE have given the accord their stamp of approval.⁸

Islam plays a key role in political discourse within the Arab world. The question of relations with Israel is impacted directly by the status of the religious establishments in each country and the nature of respective connections between religion and politics. It also exposes a profound schism in the current Arab-Muslim world.

Competing actors in the Arab-Muslim world have different and sometimes contradictory views on peace and normalization with Israel. The importance of the religious polemic in legitimizing relations with Israel stems from the significance of Islam as a source of political legitimacy in majority-Muslim societies. Islamic justifications for peace are designed partly to alleviate the cognitive dissonance accompanying the transition from years of conflict with Israel—which were often justified on religious grounds—to overt, formal relations.

The competing narratives represent distinct political, ideological, and philosophical models: tolerance versus extremism, nationalism versus transnationalism, and pragmatism versus radicalism. Israel has an interest in strengthening those that support peace and normalization, and in weakening radical actors that condemn these outcomes. The desired benefits of the agreement between Israel and the UAE were described as *maslaha* (a concept in Islamic law denoting “the public interest”), which affords them religious validation, but they also reflect concrete political, economic, and security-related aspirations.⁹ To the extent that these aspirations materialize and contribute to the countries and peoples in the region, the political and religious legitimacy of peace with Israel will grow and presumably serve to push back against counter-arguments.

While religious aspects feature prominently in normalization discourse coming from the UAE, the Israeli discourse surrounding the agreements pays only marginal attention to the role of religion. Government, civil, and religious actors in Israel should step into this vacuum and take advantage of the positive potential for interfaith activities with the UAE. The Holy Basin in Jerusalem, which was mentioned explicitly in the agreement, offers a foundation for fostering an inclusive vision around cooperation with peaceful countries (such as Jordan) and, if possible, the Palestinian Authority.

5 Anchal Vohra, “The Abraham Accords Passed Their First Big Test,” *Foreign Policy*, June 8, 2021, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/06/08/the-abraham-accords-passed-their-first-big-test/>; “UAE, Bahrain welcome new Israeli government, signaling Abraham Accords stability,” *Times of Israel*, June 15, 2021, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/uae-bahrain-welcome-new-israeli-government-signaling-abraham-accords-stability/>.

6 “The Abraham Accords,” US Department of State, accessed June 15, 2021, <https://www.state.gov/the-abraham-accords/>.

7 “Abraham Accords Declaration,” US Department of State, accessed June 15, 2021, <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Abraham-Accords-signed-FINAL-15-Sept-2020-508-1.pdf>.

8 Yoel Guzansky and Ofir Winter, “Islam in the Service of Peace: Religious Aspects of the Abraham Accord,” Institute for National Security Studies, September 6, 2020, <https://www.inss.org.il/publication/israel-uae-deal-and-islam/?offset=17&posts=218&outher=Yoel%20Guzansky>.

9 “UAE Press: Normalization Agreement with Israel Brings Hope To The Region After A Century of Conflicts And Disasters, Promotes Palestinian Cause,” Middle East Media Research Institute, August 17, 2020, <https://www.memri.org/reports/uae-press-normalization-agreement-israel-brings-hope-region-after-century-conflicts-and>.



Players of the national rugby teams of the UAE and Israel pose after their first friendly game in Dubai in March 2021. *Source: Reuters/Christopher Pike*

While the tolerance exhibited by Arab states toward Judaism neither impacts Israel directly nor includes actual recognition of Judaism's historical-religious attachment to the Land of Israel, it does have an indirect, positive impact on the "legitimization of the Jewish state" in the following ways.

It corroborates the view of Israel as the continuation of the Jewish historical presence in the Arab region, while also weakening the image of Israel as a foreign entity.¹⁰

1. It encourages narratives of coexisting Muslim, Christian, and Jewish life as a natural and desirable condition, in contrast to the Islamist view of Jews as eternal enemies.¹¹
2. It cultivates respectful, humane relations toward the Jewish "other," instead of demonization in a zero-sum game that blocks progress toward Arab-Israeli compromise.¹²
3. Israel, for its part, should warmly welcome displays of tolerance toward Jews and Judaism, encourage interreligious dialogue, support civil initiatives to revive Jewish

heritage in Arab countries, and promote tolerance between members of different religions in Israel, particularly in Jerusalem. In addition, Israel must continue cultivating shared interests with the Gulf states, expanding public ties that will legitimize these relationships, therefore inducing Muslims in the Gulf to adopt tolerant attitudes toward Israel and Judaism. Conversely, these ties could also inspire Jewish citizens of Israel to adopt tolerant attitudes toward Islam and Arabs.

Sports

Sports are one area that can create a common language between people. Academic literature and previous case studies on sports as an instrument for peace point to several ways that the UAE and Israel can leverage sports to connect their two peoples.

1. Soccer—the game of peace—is the most popular sport in the UAE and Israel. Abu Dhabi and Jerusalem could celebrate the normalization agreements between the countries by hosting an annual friendly match in September—the month they signed the Abraham

10 Yoel Guzansky and Ofir Winter, "Apolitical Normalization: A New Approach to Jews in Arab States," Institute for National Security Studies, June 8, 2020, <https://www.inss.org.il/publication/judaism-in-the-arab-world/?offset=22&posts=218&outher=Yoel%20Guzansky>.

11 Ibid.

12 Ibid.

Accords—between the national teams of the two countries.¹³

2. Economic and tax benefits could be extended to athletes, to encourage active players to join leagues in each other's country. Since athletes are extremely popular and widely respected in today's world, this could have a significant impact on how people of the two countries view each other. In a few years' time, fans from Dubai could cheer on Israeli athletes, and vice versa.¹⁴
3. Joint sports camps—which would connect youth from both countries through soccer, handball, track and field, judo, and other popular sporting activities—could provide a venue where youth could get to know each other around their shared enthusiasm for sports.¹⁵ These camps would offer a great platform for discussion: a week-long camp would give ample opportunity for both playing together on the field and spending several hours each day in workshops on the society, culture, and history of the UAE and Israel.
4. Host nations could inaugurate a binational soccer tournament, with teams from Israel and the UAE competing every two to three years for the Peace Cup. The competition would alternate between hosts and could be expanded later to include additional squads from countries such as Morocco and Egypt. This ten-day event would bring delegations to the host countries and would attract considerable public attention around the world; if marketed appropriately, international soccer governing body FIFA could embrace it, which could also incentivize broader participation from teams in the region. (FIFA could, for instance, declare that every match played during the tournament would be recognized for the purposes of FIFA rankings.)
5. Israelis and Emiratis could draw upon comparative advantages in sports, helping to develop and promote branches where one country may be stronger than the other. Israel, for example, is home to one of the world's

While religious aspects feature prominently in normalization discourse coming from the UAE, the Israeli discourse surrounding the agreements pays only marginal attention to the role of religion.

top chess federations while the UAE ranks only eighty-sixth in the world. Israel could send its talented players to train young players in the UAE.

Higher Education and Research

To date, five agreements have been signed between Israel and the UAE in the field of higher education.

1. In September 2020, a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) envisioning a \$100 million investment in collaboration, exchange programs, conferences and seminars, “sharing of computing resources, and the establishment of a joint virtual institute for artificial intelligence” was signed between Israel's Weizmann Institute and the Mohamed bin Zayed University of Artificial Intelligence. The focus will be on research in biomedicine, climate research, and particle physics.¹⁶
2. In October 2020, a trilateral strategic partnership between the Atlantic Council in Washington DC, the Institute for National Security Studies in Tel Aviv, and the Emirates Policy Center in Abu Dhabi was announced. The agreement builds on momentum from

13 The example of ping-pong diplomacy between the United States and China in 1971 has been researched by Stuart Murray, see: Stuart Murray, “Moving Beyond the Ping-Pong Table: Sports Diplomacy in the Modern Diplomatic Environment,” *Public Diplomacy Magazine*, no. 9 (Winter 2013): 11-17.

14 There are many examples of the impact that foreign players have had on the acceptance of different cultures and religions. The best contemporary study relates to Mohammad Salah's career with Liverpool. See: Mahmud el-Shafey, “Mohamed Salah, a football player with impact beyond stadiums,” *Arab Weekly*, April 3, 2018, <https://thearabweekly.com/mohamed-salah-football-player-impact-beyond-stadiums>.

15 This recommendation is based on the Football for Peace initiative. See: “Football 4 Peace International,” University of Brighton, accessed June 15, 2021, <https://www.football4peace.org.uk/>.

16 “Israel's Weizmann Institute, UAE University to Collaborate on AI Research,” *NoCamels, Israeli Innovation News*, September 13, 2020, <https://nocamels.com/2020/09/israel-weizmann-institute-uae-ai-research/>.

the Abraham Accords and establishes a hub for members of the global think tank community to contribute to UAE-Israeli relations.

3. Also in October 2020, Tel Aviv University's Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies and the TRENDS Research and Advisory Center in Abu Dhabi concluded an MoU which aims to foster academic cooperation touching on the geopolitics of the Middle East, economics, and intercultural relations. Plans are underway for "joint research projects, workshops, seminars, an exchange of publications, and joint releases of publications."¹⁷
4. In January 2021, the TRENDS Center concluded a second MoU with Haifa University, following the participation of TRENDS researchers in a symposium hosted by Haifa University's Ezri Center for Maritime Policy and Strategy.¹⁸ It bears note that Haifa University President Ron Robin served as senior vice-provost of New York University (NYU), charged with launching NYU's Abu Dhabi campus.¹⁹
5. Also in January 2021, Bar-Ilan University's Azrieli Faculty of Medicine signed an MoU with the UAE's Gulf Medical University—widely considered among the region's leading private medical universities—to collaborate on joint medical research. The agreement "calls for the exchange of researchers and students at the graduate and undergraduate levels; joint academic programs in the fields of medical science, medical education, and health-systems administration; and the publication of joint academic studies."²⁰

Irrespective of developments on the Israeli-Palestinian track, policy makers in Jerusalem and Abu Dhabi should be formulating a longer-term strategy to bolster ties between the two countries in the educational arena. Three data points highlight the potential for creative thinking. First,

while the overall number of outbound degree-seeking Emirati students has increased in the last fifteen years—with most choosing to study in the United States or the United Kingdom (UK)—the last few years witnessed a decline in the number of Emirati students attending American universities; this would suggest that students may be keen to look in the region for top-notch higher education opportunities.²¹ Second, a recent report by the Organization for Economic Development and Cooperation found that eight out of ten students in the UAE, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia expect to work in jobs that may soon become obsolete due to technological advancement.²² Third, Israel's Council for Higher Education and the Planning and Budgeting Committee have emphasized—in response to a declining student growth rate in Israeli universities over the last decade—the need for Israel to attract a greater number of international students to its universities.²³

These three trends underscore a potential role for Israel and the UAE in leveraging their respective higher education systems and technological prowess to encourage educational exchanges, thereby assisting both countries in aligning their human capital with the needs of evolving labor markets. A possible initiative could include semester-long courses that bring Israeli and Emirati students together in Israeli and Emirati educational institutions.

Political and Social Obstacles

With the signing of the Abraham Accords, statements from Emirati and Israeli diplomats, academics, and researchers expressed a desire for this peace to be "warm"—transcending traditional diplomatic ties to encompass manifold personal and business links. In spite of this initial optimism and excitement, however, several stumbling blocks impede the way to creating meaningful people-to-people relationships between the UAE and Israel.

17 "Historic TAU-UAE Partnership Symbolizes Hopeful Future," Tel Aviv University, October 26, 2020, <https://english.m.tau.ac.il/news/TAU-UAE-partnership>.

18 "Haifa University signs cooperation agreement with UAE research institute," *Jerusalem Post*, January 3, 2021, <https://www.jpost.com/middle-east/haifa-university-sign-cooperation-agreement-with-uae-research-institute-654014>.

19 Jacob Kamaras, "Israel-UAE deal could position Abu Dhabi as 'ideas capital' through higher-education ties," *Jewish News Syndicate*, August 26, 2020, <https://www.jns.org/israel-uae-deal-could-position-abu-dhabi-as-idea-capital-through-higher-education-ties/>.

20 Ilanit Chernick, "In first, Israeli university signs joint medical research agreement with UAE's Gulf Medical U," *Israel Newsstand*, January 12, 2021, <https://www.israelnewsstand.com/in-first-israeli-university-signs-joint-medical-research-agreement-with-uaes-gulf-medical-u/>.

21 Kevin Kamal, "Education in the United Arab Emirates," *World Education News + Reviews*, August 10, 2018, <https://wenr.wes.org/2018/08/education-in-the-united-arab-emirates>.

22 Anthony Mann, et al., "Dream Jobs? Teenagers' Career Aspirations and the Future of Work," Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2020, <https://www.oecd.org/education/dream-jobs-teenagers-career-aspirations-and-the-future-of-work.htm>.

23 "Higher education in Israel," Sphere - Support for Promotion for Higher Education Reform Experts, accessed June 15, 2021, <https://supportthere.org/page/higher-education-israel>.



A wooden footbridge leads up from the Western Wall to the Al-Aqsa mosque and the Dome of the Rock. *Source: Reuters/Ronen Zvulun*

The main hurdle to establishing a warm peace and creating personal relationships between Emiratis and Israelis is the Palestinian issue. Although recent polls conducted in the UAE indicate that public opinion is primarily concerned with the threat from Iran, and that the Palestinian issue is a less pressing concern, certain segments of Emirati society have approached peace with Israel with a degree of indifference, signalling that they regard a resolution to the Palestinian issue as a prerequisite for engaging in deeper personal relations with Israelis.²⁴ This issue will likely surface again when any future normalization agreements between Israel and Arab states are considered.

Other hurdles in the way of a truly normalized relationship between Emiratis and Israelis are secondary and their effects can be mitigated through policy channels. Despite many cultural similarities between Emiratis and Israelis,

glaring cultural differences are further complicated by the fact that these two cultures have not interacted with one another in modern history. Cultural exchanges can play an important role in bridging this gap. Prominent figures in civil society or youth social media “influencers” can use tools such as Clubhouse and Zoom to facilitate the exchange of ideas. At the same time, cultural similarities between the two peoples should be emphasized. Arab Israelis could play a significant role in bridging this cultural divide.

A concerted tourism campaign geared toward Emiratis that highlights pilgrimage sites such as the Al Aqsa Mosque and the Dome of the Rock could encourage more travel to Israel from the UAE. Medical tourism represents another opportunity, albeit of more limited scope, to encourage travel between the two states; the advanced Israeli health sector

²⁴ Kristin Smith Diwan, “Public Debate Over the Abraham Accords Reflects Range of Views on Normalization in the Gulf,” Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington, August 24, 2020, <https://agsiw.org/public-debate-over-the-abraham-accords-reflects-range-of-views-on-normalization-in-the-gulf/>.

already has experience in promoting Israel as a destination for such travel.

Despite accounts that the UAE has welcomed over 130,000 Israeli tourists since the signing of the Abrahamic Accords, this number has not yet been reciprocated by Emiratis.²⁵ To understand the hesitancy on the part of Emiratis to visit Israel, one must also understand that the nature of the Emirati traveller is generally cautious. Certain security concerns that Emiratis have about visiting Israel—such as the particular fear that they might face a backlash from Palestinians who are opposed to the signing of the Abraham Accords—must be addressed as well.²⁶ (At present, it should be noted, the Covid-19 pandemic constitutes the greatest impediment to any outbound travel by Emiratis.)

In order to overcome these obstacles, or at the very least lessen their effects, a roadmap should be drawn to cultivate interpersonal and inter-business relations between the two countries. This blueprint would construct solid foundations for friendship between Israel and the UAE. It would provide a legal framework to promote partnership between official institutions—government ministries, customs agencies, sister cities, and the like—in both states. Expanded consideration should also be afforded to shared national interests, both on the official (e.g., security and economics) and the unofficial (e.g., business, investments, and tourism) levels. These steps will set the stage for promoting a full gamut of exchanges between the two countries.

The US Role

If normalization between Israel and the UAE is to endure and prosper, US President Joe Biden must also assert leadership in this endeavor.²⁷ For all the imperfections of

the Abraham Accords, including the short shrift given the Palestinians and the introduction of additional strategic weapons into an already volatile neighborhood, the agreements paved the way to broader reconciliation; Sudan and Morocco both established formal ties with Israel subsequently.²⁸ Nothing—not even the imprimatur of the previous US administration—should prevent Biden from embracing their innovative substance.²⁹

The White House has wisely indicated that it hopes to work with the new Israeli coalition headed by Prime Minister Naftali Bennett in building on the accords.³⁰ Continuity of US involvement and commitment will be critical to strengthening budding ties between Israel and the Gulf states, particularly in the realm of people-to-people activities like the aforementioned. Enhanced normalization among these former adversaries will amplify the reach of what could become an updated version of the vaunted Pax Americana and help enable the United States and its allies to address other pressing challenges, especially at a time when US relations with Russia and China are strained and US policy makers identify the Indo-Pacific region as a priority.³¹

Notably, some of the efforts to facilitate contact across the Israeli-Arab divide are already backed by the US government, originating in the accords themselves. Other projects are managed by non-governmental organizations in the United States; one example of this cohort is the Warm Peace Movement, which promotes a broad range of cultural activities that connect Israelis and Arabs under the banner of the Abraham Accords.³²

Press reports suggesting that the new administration has frozen the Abraham Fund—which was introduced at the signing of the Abraham Accords and geared to support

25 Marco Ferrari, "Israel wants to set up road links with UAE, says 130,000 tourists visited: Diplomat," *Alarabiya News*, August 31, 2020, <https://english.alarabiya.net/News/middle-east/2021/02/01/Israel-diplomat-discusses-potential-UAE-road-links-says-130-000-tourists-visited-sin>.

26 Aaron Boxerman, "Emirati economic delegation visits Temple Mount, is insulted by Palestinians," *Times of Israel*, October 19, 2020, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/emirati-economic-delegation-quietly-visits-israel-is-accosted-on-temple-mount/>.

27 "Readout of President Joseph R. Biden, Jr. Call with Abu Dhabi Crown Prince Mohamed bin Zayed," White House Briefing Room, May 4, 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/05/04/readout-of-president-joseph-r-biden-jr-call-with-abu-dhabi-crown-prince-mohamed-bin-zayed/>.

28 "Joint Declaration: The Kingdom of Morocco, the United States of America, and the State of Israel," US Department of State, accessed June 15, 2020, <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Joint-Declaration-US-Morocco-Israel.pdf>; "Joint Statement of the United States, the Republic of Sudan, and the State of Israel," Trump White House Archives, October 23, 2020, <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefings-statements/joint-statement-united-states-republic-sudan-state-israel/>.

29 Shalom Lipner and Jonathan Ferziger, "President Biden Must Engage With the Abraham Accords," *The National*, March 23, 2021, <https://www.thenationalnews.com/opinion/comment/president-biden-must-engage-with-the-abraham-accords-1.1183249>.

30 Laurie Kellman, Matt Lee, and Ellen Knickmeyer, "Blinken, Lapid meet in Rome amid reset US-Israel relations," *AP News*, June 28, 2021, <https://apnews.com/article/joe-biden-europe-rome-israel-middle-east-ae850ef6fc154a5e38bf211bf5c5a40>.

31 Steven Simon and Jonathan Stevenson, "The End of Pax Americana: Why Washington's Middle East Pullback Makes Sense," *Foreign Affairs*, November/December 2015, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/middle-east/end-pax-americana>.

32 "The Warm Peace Movement," Warm Peace Movement, accessed July 2021, <https://www.warmpeace.org/>.



UAE Ambassador to Israel Mohamed Al Khaja, Israeli President Isaac Herzog, and other officials press a button to start the stock exchange market during the opening ceremony of the Emirati embassy in Tel Aviv, Israel July 14, 2021. *Source: Reuters/Amir Cohen*

Gulf-Israel engagement, albeit without tangible plans for its operation—would, if true, point to a missed opportunity.³³ In fact, a bipartisan group of US senators submitted a bill in March that calls on the White House and other US government agencies to allocate funds for initiatives in support of the accords and greater normalization between Israel and Arab states.³⁴ The legislation features, among other things, an instruction to bolster US State Department and US Agency for International Development (USAID) exchange programs for Israeli and Arab young people.

The United States would benefit from preserving the Abraham Fund while adapting its mission to pursue positive change that supports American interests, for instance, elevating environmental concerns within the framework of US-sponsored infrastructure projects. (Interfaith dialogue, tolerance education, and integration of women, youth, and the disabled into the work force offer other promising avenues.) Particularly following the last administration's pivot toward isolationism, clear US resolve on the endowment's fate is critical to reassuring partners in the region. It would be regrettable if the accomplishments of the Abraham Accords themselves were neglected and left to wither.

Their demise would weaken the foundations of peace and damage US credibility, sending negative signals amid efforts to re-establish multilateral coordination in exploring renewed engagement with Iran.³⁵

Another promising development is the launch of the Abraham Accords Institute for Peace—a venture with both Democratic and Republican backers—that will “focus on increasing trade and tourism” between Israel, the UAE, Bahrain, Morocco, and Sudan, as well as conceive “programs to foster people-to-people connections between the countries.”³⁶ Among the institute's principals are Jared Kushner, the son-in-law and Middle East envoy of former US President Donald Trump, and Haim Saban, an Israeli-American businessman and Democratic donor.

In applauding the spirit of the Abraham Accords, the Biden administration can capitalize on a breakthrough that has torn down barriers once thought to be impenetrable. For the first time, many Arabs and Israelis are meeting each other in person. In March 2021, Mohamed Al Khaja, the first Emirati ambassador to Israel, presented his credentials

33 Danny Zaken, “US freezes Abraham Fund, as Israel-UAE business ties falter,” *Globes*, July 7, 2021, <https://en.globes.co.il/en/article-us-freezes-abraham-fund-as-israel-uae-business-ties-falter-1001377257>.

34 “Risch, Portman, Young, and Cardin Introduce Israel Relations Normalization Act of 2021,” United States Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, Ranking Member's Press, March 26, 2021, <https://www.foreign.senate.gov/press/ranking/release/risch-portman-booker-young-and-cardin-introduce-israel-relations-normalization-act-of-2021>.

35 Farnaz Fassih and David E. Sanger, “Iran Rejects Nuclear Deal Talks With US Proposed by Europe,” *New York Times*, February 28, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/02/28/world/middleeast/iran-nuclear-talks-united-states.html>.

36 Barak Ravid, “Scoop: Jared Kushner founds Abraham Accords Institute,” *Axios*, May 5, 2021, <https://www.axios.com/jared-kushner-abraham-accords-institute-a3be5e91-928c-496b-a324-9b988e2984a9.html>.

to Israel's president in Jerusalem.³⁷ And many more milestones have followed.

Going forward, the administration can help nurture the Gulf-Israel alliance and boost regional stability by helping to forge "a historic peace" between Saudi Arabia and Israel, making good on Biden's aspiration to not squander an opportunity inherited from the previous administration; this objective could be folded into the administration's broader reassessment of US relations with Riyadh.³⁸ President Biden is well positioned to put his personal stamp on last year's Arab-Israeli rapprochement and extend its promise to other parts of the region, possibly even to persuade Palestinians and Israelis to resolve their conflict, or at least return to negotiations.³⁹

The United States can also use diplomacy to incentivize remaining Gulf Cooperation Council members—not only Saudi Arabia but also Oman, Kuwait, and Qatar—to normalize ties with Israel. Lending support to Emirati and Bahraini plans for improving the welfare of Palestinians is also compatible with White House goals. In that vein, the Biden administration should cultivate a critical mass of Gulf states (and other Arab and Muslim countries) to support any future effort to resolve the Israel-Palestinian conflict, however unrealistic such a goal may prove in the immediate term. The Middle East Partnership for Peace Act of 2020 (MEPPA), with its dedicated US resources for building a "foundation for peaceful co-existence between Israelis and Palestinians," could be helpful in this regard.⁴⁰

Conclusion

Emiratis and Israelis have expressed an overwhelming desire for peace between their countries to be warm and deep. Against the backdrop of existing security cooperation between the two countries—which have never engaged in a direct territorial dispute and whose strategic interests are greatly aligned—the path is now clear for both

"Continuity of US involvement and commitment will be critical to strengthening budding ties between Israel and the Gulf states, particularly in the realm of people-to-people activities."

nations to reap and share the diplomatic, economic, and societal benefits of closer ties.

Policy makers in Jerusalem and Abu Dhabi would be wise to formulate a strategy to achieve this goal. Stumbling blocks should be addressed and overcome to capitalize on initial optimism and excitement about the possibility of creating meaningful relationships between people and communities in the UAE and Israel.

Other Arab rulers are considering multiple variables in an unfolding regional realignment, including the option of jumping on the normalization bandwagon. It is likely that they will move cautiously, waiting to first see how the Israel-UAE gambit plays out. In this context, the economic, religious, and political weight of Saudi Arabia gives Israel a particular interest in bringing the kingdom into the Abraham Accords. Various internal and external constraints—as well as a set of indigenous sensitivities—suggest that Riyadh's price of entry could be higher than that of its Gulf neighbours and, thus, it remains unclear when and under what conditions Saudi Arabia would be willing to sign a similar agreement with Israel.

37 "UAE ambassador presents credentials to Israeli president in historic first," *The National*, MENA, March 3, 2021, <https://www.thenationalnews.com/mena/uae-ambassador-presents-credentials-to-israeli-president-in-historic-first-1175288>.

38 "Department Press Briefing – March 1, 2021," US Department of State, March 1, 2021, <https://www.state.gov/briefings/department-press-briefing-march-1-2021/>; Ben Hubbard, "In Saudi Arabia, Quiet Changes May Ease Tensions With Biden," *New York Times*, January 19, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/19/world/middleeast/saudi-reforms-biden.html>.

39 Lipner and Ferziger, "President Biden Must Engage With the Abraham Accords."

40 "Nita M. Lowey Middle East Partnership For Peace Act Of 2020," Jewish Virtual Library, accessed June 15, 2020, <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/nita-m-lowey-middle-east-partnership-for-peace-act-of-2020>.

About the Authors

Dr. Yoel Guzansky is a senior research fellow at the Institute for National Security Studies (INSS) specializing in Gulf politics and security. Dr. Guzansky is also a non-resident scholar at the Middle East Institute in Washington, DC. He is currently a consultant to several ministries.

Shalom Lipner is a nonresident senior fellow for Middle East Programs at the Atlantic Council. From 1990 to 2016, he served seven consecutive premiers at the prime minister's office in Jerusalem.

Jonathan H. Ferziger is a nonresident senior fellow in the Atlantic Council's Middle East Programs. Ferziger is a veteran foreign correspondent, who reported for Bloomberg News and United Press International from postings in Israel, the Persian Gulf, and Southeast Asia.

Dr. Sarah J. Feuer is a research fellow at INSS, and an associate fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy. At INSS, Feuer is managing a research program examining region-wide developments across the Arab Middle East, and continuing to track political and security-related developments in North Africa.

Dr. Tomer Fadlon is a research fellow in the Economics and National Security Program at the Institute for National Security Studies. Fadlon's publications address a wide range of issues related to the global and regional economy, and how these economic and political developments affect Israel.

Ari Heistein is a researcher and chief of staff to the director at the INSS. His research focuses on US foreign policy, the US-Israel relationship, Israeli strategy vis-à-vis Iran, and the Yemeni civil war.

Dr. Ebtessam Al-Ketbi is president of the Emirates Policy Center (EPC), which she founded in Abu Dhabi in September 2013. EPC undertakes the task of studying and foreseeing future regional and international geopolitical projects and their impact on the Gulf region based on the region's self-perception of its concerns and interests.

Noura Al Breiki is an assistant researcher at the Emirates Policy Center.



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Atlantic Council

1030 15th Street, NW, 12th Floor,
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(202) 463-7226, www.AtlanticCouncil.org