

# The Negev Summit – What Next?

Editor: Anat Kurz | April 3, 2022

The Negev Summit focused on images: The countries whose representatives took part in the meeting sought to convey a message of joint organizing for facing shared challenges. The United States also sought to demonstrate a commitment to its allies in the Middle East and to the region's stability by attending the summit. But in practice, the region's countries cannot prevent the finalizing of a renewed nuclear agreement with Iran and, apart from Israel, they are deterred from confronting Iran militarily; the Houthis continue to launch strikes against Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, without a real response on their part; and despite Washington's request, the Gulf countries are choosing not to increase their oil and natural gas production in order to help the West to deal with the energy crisis and mitigate the increase in fuel prices. Therefore, despite Israel's impressive achievement in holding the summit in the Negev, the determination and ability of the participants to render the understandings achieved during the summit into effective policy remains an open question.

The articles in this collection address various aspects of the Negev Summit: the international, American, and Middle Eastern positions – the Gulf countries, Egypt and Morocco - with an emphasis on Iran-related issues. Also discussed the implications of the summit for those who did not participate – the Palestinians and Jordan. The summit's consequences for Israel's national security and for its standing in the Middle East and in the international arena are a central motif in all the articles.

## Focusing on Images and Less on Actions

### Udi Dekel

The foreign ministers of the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Bahrain, Morocco, Egypt, the United States, and Israel convened for the Negev Summit, the first of its kind hosted by Israel, following the summit held earlier in March 2022 in Sharm el-Sheikh, which was attended by Prime Minister Naftali Bennett, President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi and Crown Prince Mohamed bin Zayed.

The summit took place against the backdrop of Russia's military invasion of Ukraine, which has aroused security fears in many countries and has led to rising oil and food prices, all occurring as the great powers and Iran are on the verge of reaching a nuclear agreement. The timing of the summit reflects the view of the participating countries of the shared threats that they face, especially those from Iran, which are increasing by the apparent American readiness to remove the restrictions imposed on Iran and release resources that will serve Tehran in continuing its subversive and destabilizing activity in the region. Another source of concern is the prevailing perception of American disengagement from the region and its consequences. Although the purpose of the summit was not intentionally defined, its essence was to create a basis for jointly navigating the new global and regional reality, which includes:

- a) Cooperating against Iran – in a kind of Middle East security alliance (MESA). Just as the West united against Russia while NATO alliance consolidated its ranks, the pragmatic Arabic countries are uniting with Israel against Iran.
- b) Coordinating policies in face of a new global situation, characterized by increasing competition between the great powers, while at this stage the main arena is in Europe. This development is strengthened by the US departure from the Middle East and leaves a vacuum in which Iran can increase its intervention and influence throughout the region. Consequently, it is necessary to move to close the vacuum, to the point of enlisting in rehabilitating Syria, as was hinted during President Assad's recent visit to the UAE.
- c) Presenting a unified position vis-à-vis the US, which is demanding that the countries in the region choose a side against Russia in the conflict in Ukraine. This is all while the US seeks to establish an agreement – considered to be ineffective and temporary – with Iran, the aggressive player in the Middle East, and is even willing to legitimize the Iranian Revolutionary Guard. The message to Washington is: "You also have to choose sides!"
- d) Demanding from the Biden administration to continue its support for the Abraham Accords (the only positive legacy of the Trump administration), to enhance and expand them and to advance issues of primarily regional security, energy, technology and economy – all within the framework of the accords.

Even the murderous attack that occurred in Israel, in Hadera, on the eve of the summit did not ruin the summit's important symbolism, which in part emphasized the official descent of the Palestinian issue from the regional stage. The Arab world is accepting Israel into the club without conditions. Israel also received another opportunity to demonstrate that it is playing in the big leagues – mediating between President Putin and President Zelensky and also between Washington and the Arab countries – as the special relations between Israel and the US have contributed to the notion that the path to Washington goes through Jerusalem (even though the summit was not held in Israel's capital due to well-known sensitivities).

Essentially, the Negev Summit focused on images: The countries whose representatives took part in the meeting sought to convey a message of joint organizing for shared challenges. The United States for its part sought to demonstrate a commitment to its allies in the region and to the region's stability by attending the summit. But in practice, the region's countries cannot prevent the conclusion of a nuclear agreement with Iran and, apart from Israel, they are deterred from confronting Iran militarily; the Houthis continue to launch strikes against Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, without a real response on their part; and despite Washington's request, the Gulf countries are choosing not to increase their oil production in order to help stabilizing the energy market. Therefore, despite Israel's impressive achievement in holding the summit in the Negev, the determination and ability of the participants to render the understandings achieved during the meeting into effective policy remains an open question.

### **Too Early to Eulogize the US Involvement in the Middle East**

#### **Oded Eran**

Since President Barack Obama entered the White House in 2009, the Middle East has been lamenting the US abandonment of the region, and over the past two decades, key countries in the region have tended to pin some of their crises and problems on the lack of a strong American presence. From their perspective, the fact that the US did not stand with the Egyptian regime at the beginning of the Arab Spring nor did it protest the Syrian regime's use of gas against its own population, in addition to the Biden administration's position regarding the Iranian nuclear program and Iran's entrenchment in parts of the region have all been interpreted as evidence of an American policy that seeks to reduce its presence and investment in the region. To these we can also add the clear American

statements about the US defense strategy, centered on contending with its two adversaries – China and Russia.

Indeed, certain aspects of American global conduct, especially during the years of the Trump presidency, have created in the Middle East as well as in Europe the sense of lacking an American partner in dealing with critical strategic issues. Paradoxically, these feelings actually helped the Trump administration to bring several Arab countries closer to Israel, in the understanding that a reduced American commitment required new partnerships and letting go of long-time differences and grudges, such as in their relations with Israel or with Turkey.

It is still too early to assess the impact of the Russian invasion of Ukraine and its consequences for the development of the world order. However, at this stage, it can be estimated that it has dealt a serious blow to China and Russia's attempt to create a new world order while also posing a challenge to the predominant international standing of the US.

Therefore, the Negev Summit should be seen as an attempt, not necessarily fully coordinated, by the participating countries to take advantage of the US return to leading the existing order as a means of advancing shared interests as well as the unique interests of each country. Along with the desire to prolong President Biden's "finest hour," the American administration sought to explain its policy on the Iranian nuclear issue and to convince those who are concerned about it; to enlist assistance in implementing the sanctions imposed on Russia by increasing the production and export of oil and natural gas; and also to encourage progress on the Israeli-Palestinian issue (although the Palestinians were not invited to the summit and some of them even condemned it). Out of its desire to position itself as the predominant great power, that is responsible for global stability, the US listened attentively to the concerns of the countries of the region regarding the supply of basic food products. As for the Middle Eastern participating states, within the framework of the summit Egypt endeavored to renew its image as an important pillar of the Middle East, while the Gulf states sought evidence that the US is committed to their main security concerns and to their connection with Israel.

David Ben-Gurion, the first leader of the State of Israel, who is buried not far from the location of the summit, undoubtedly would have been amazed by the summit had he seen it and the witnessed the long way that relations between Israel and key countries in the region have come. And now, Israel will also seek American aid in stimulating the regional normalization process.

## **The Iranian Aspect**

### **Sima Shine**

The Negev Summit is, first and foremost, a significant contribution to the State of Israel's national security. The public transformation of Israel into part of the regional fabric and as a central axis in the cooperation between Sunni Arab countries strengthens Israel's standing vis-à-vis hostile elements – chiefly Iran – as well as its ally, the US, which sees the emerging relations in the regional sphere in the Middle East as asset for itself too.

A series of shared interests – some apparent for a while now and some having developed in recent years – formed the basis for the foreign ministers' summit, which served as a continuation of the summit that took place earlier that month in Sharm el-Sheikh and was attended by Prime Minister Naftali Bennett, President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi and Crown Prince Mohamed bin Zaid.. The main issues on the agenda at the Negev Summit were the Iranian threat, the progress of the nuclear program as well as Iran's regional policy; the war in Ukraine, which creates a need for the pro-American camp to consider its policy toward Russia and China; bilateral difficulties of some of the Sunni countries vis-à-vis the US; and shared economic interests.

The Iranian threat was undoubtedly a clear and tangible common denominator for all the summit's participants. But here too the emphases were slightly different; Israel sees the nuclear issue as its most serious strategic threat. Although the emerging agreement with Iran will indeed turn back several components of the nuclear program, Israel is worried that the agreement will not erase the considerable knowledge that Iran has accumulated during the past three years and that, at the same time, Washington will no longer consider the nuclear issue a concern in the coming years. The Sunni Arab countries are more apprehensive about Iran's regional policy and are concerned that a return to the nuclear agreement could reduce American interest in Iran and its policy, while giving Tehran a freer hand in helping its allies in the region and advancing its regional influence through them, including by subverting existing regimes.

Iran also is closely following the statements about a regional defensive system against missiles and UAVs. Tehran's main military advantage is its ability to harm the Gulf countries and Israel and to threaten the US presence in both Iraq and the Gulf with its missile systems and UAVs, which have provided Iran with the partial ability to deny any direct involvement in attacks. Therefore, the possibility of creating a regional defense system together with the US, with its high-level technological capabilities, poses a serious scenario for Tehran. In the past,

following the establishment of formal relations with Israel, Iran warned the UAE and Bahrain should they allow any activity against it from their territory and threatened a harsh response. The recent attack on Aramco's oil facilities in Saudi Arabia, however, only strengthens the interest of all the participants in the Negev Summit to cooperate in protecting their vital interests. A defensive system of the kind discussed, for which Iran does not have a response, would circumvent Iran's capabilities and, if implemented, would also strengthen the relations of the Gulf states with Israel and the US – in complete contrast to Iran's interests.

## **Israel and the Gulf Countries Together and Vis-à-Vis the United States**

### **Yoel Guzansky**

The historic Negev Summit attested not only to the closer ties between Israel and several of its Arab neighbors but also to Israel's role in alleviating tensions between the Arab countries and the US. These tensions have intensified with the war in Ukraine and the refusal of the Arab countries, chiefly Saudi Arabia and the UAE, to toe the line with US policy and to take a more significant role in the diplomatic and economic isolation of Russia. Even though most Arab countries still see relations with the US as a central pillar of their security, they are troubled by the reduced American attention toward the Middle East in general and their security problems in particular.

Furthermore, the Gulf states are concerned about the nuclear agreement that the US is reaching with Iran, which in their view will empower Iran at their expense. The Gulf states may be willing to cooperate more closely with the US regarding the war in Ukraine – as long as the US responds positively to at least some of their concerns about Iran. Hence they would be content with increased operative and intelligence cooperation with the US and the strengthening of their defensive capabilities, with an emphasis on defense against missiles and UAVs.

The Gulf states concern regarding the agreement with Iran is manifested by the attacks against Saudi Arabia, which have recently intensified, and are carried out by Iran's proxies in Yemen. The Gulf states clearly link together a US contribution to their defense with their willingness to comply with the US demand to increase oil production in order to mitigate its price increase.

The disagreements between the Gulf states and Washington are evident in changes to the foreign policy of several key Arab countries, whose policies have adapted to the circumstances, namely the increased standing of Russia and China in the Middle East, even at the expense of the US. The view that the Arab countries

cannot depend upon the US if they are attacked by Iran has gained strength following the events in Ukraine and is echoed by main Arab press columnists.

The Negev Summit attested to the fact that Israel and the Gulf states are aligned not only with one another but also together vis-à-vis the US. However, even if additional American steps are taken to support the security of the Gulf states and the Gulf states themselves increase their production of oil – doubts about the future of US involvement in the region will continue, as will the need of the Arab countries to hedge risks and opportunities.

## **Egypt Joins the Axis of the Abraham Accords**

### **Ofir Winter**

Egypt was the last country to confirm its participation in the Negev Summit, and this is no coincidence. The summit did not fit Cairo's style in several ways – its publicity, the leading regional standing given to Israel as the summit's host, and the conspicuous absence of the Palestinians. In addition, while Egypt welcomed the Abraham Accords after they were declared, it objected to their spirit and kept a distance from them. For example, Egypt sent a low-ranking representative to the regional minister-level conference held in the UAE last October and in general has been sparing in its expressions of multilateral normalization that exceed its past tradition.

Egypt's participation in the Negev Summit also diverged from the independent Egyptian line vis-à-vis the Iranian issue, which was at the center of the summit. Indeed, Cairo sees the subversion by Iran and its proxies as a threat to the region's stability and follows with concern what it perceives as Washington's undermining of its commitment to its regional allies. Cairo has also made sure to condemn the Houthi attacks on Saudi Arabia, which have already led to rising oil prices clearly felt in Egypt, and to declare that the security of the Gulf states is part of Arab national security. At the same time, however, Egypt does not share the same sense of urgency that the Gulf states and Israel feel about the possible return to the nuclear agreement.

Nevertheless, recently there has been a change in Egypt's policy. Egypt is slowly joining the axis of the countries of the Abraham Accords and placing itself at the center of the emerging regional coalition. Toward the end of March, Egypt hosted the trilateral leaders' summit at Sharm el-Sheikh, with the participation of President el-Sisi, Prime Minister Bennett, and Crown Prince bin Zayed, and later accepted Israel's invitation to attend the foreign ministers' summit in the Negev, albeit after deliberations and hesitations.



Behind Cairo's steps are weighty strategic interests, mainly to seek assistance from the US, the Gulf states, and Israel for coping with the intensifying economic challenges Egypt faces due to the war in Ukraine. On March 23, Egypt appealed to the International Monetary Fund requesting a new aid package, and it needs American support for its approval. Egypt also expects increased support from its Gulf allies – Saudi Arabia and the UAE. In addition, the current circumstances have increased the appeal of bilateral and regional initiatives (with Israel's participation), particularly in the fields of energy, tourism, and food security.

Beyond the symbolic importance of having a country like Egypt with regional status participate in the summit, Egypt can fulfill an important role in shaping the regional architecture, which will strengthen the influence of the pragmatic Arab axis and weaken the Iranian influence, for example by removing Iran from the Gaza Strip; bringing Iraq closer to Jordan and Egypt as part of the "New Levant" alliance; ensuring navigation in the Red Sea vis-à-vis the Houthi threats in Yemen; providing natural gas to Lebanon through Jordan and Syria; and perhaps also by bringing Syria back into the Arab world.

## **A Step Up in Israel-Morocco Relations**

### **Morr Link**

Moroccan Foreign Minister Nasser Bourita made his first visit in Israel on the occasion of the Negev Summit, during a period full of positive developments in many fields of Israeli-Moroccan relations. Thus, at the end of March, a high-level Israeli military delegation visited Morocco, met with the chief of staff of the Moroccan army, and signed a military cooperation agreement. The economic and cultural aspects of the relations between the two countries are also developing quickly, and include signing of agreements, holding conferences, and expanding direct flights between them. At the same time, Morocco's interests, which were the basis for its participation in the summit, are much broader than its bilateral relations with Israel.

First, it is apparent that Morocco's partners in the summit – with an emphasis on Israel, of course – are especially concerned about the threat posed by Iran. Morocco and Iran do not have friendly relations. Morocco severed its relations with Iran in 2009 and again in 2018, when King Mohammed VI accused Iran of arming the Polisario Front, which opposes Moroccan control of Western Sahara. Iran also cultivates relations with Algeria, Morocco's rival. However, it should be remembered that the interests of the Arab countries (including Morocco) with regard to Iran are not identical to those of Israel; therefore, at this stage, it is difficult to expect the emergence of a unified regional policy against Iran, as can



be learned from the détente in the UAE and Saudi Arabia's relations with Iran in the past year.

No less important – and more prominent in Moroccan media headlines – are economic issues, which came up in the summit's discussions. Morocco, like the rest of the countries in the Middle East, is clearly feeling the effects of the war in Ukraine. The rise in food and energy prices is expected to harm the Moroccan economy, which had started to show signs of recovery following the COVID-19 pandemic. This development is taking place at a time when Morocco is suffering from the most serious drought in recent decades, which has severely harmed the agricultural sector and has led the World Bank to announce the provision of a loan of 180 million dollars intended to support Moroccan agriculture.

In addition, Morocco is interested in building its relations with Israel and the US, in part to strengthen and affirm the US policy on the issue of Western Sahara, which the US had recognized as a territory under Moroccan sovereignty in return for the normalization of relations with Israel.

At the same time, it should be remembered that Morocco was not present at the UN General Assembly vote that condemned the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Foreign Minister Bourita also met recently with the Chinese Special Envoy to the Middle East, Zhai Jun. They discussed improving relations between the countries, against the backdrop of the increasing Chinese investments in Morocco and Morocco's joining of the Belt and Road Initiative. It seems then that Morocco continues to signal that it wishes to maintain an independent foreign policy to some extent vis-à-vis the US.

## **The Palestinians Are Not on the Field**

### **Kobi Michael**

The summit of foreign ministers at Sde Boker is an impressive achievement for Israel's foreign policy. Israel has proven to be a leading axis and player in shaping a new regional architecture.

In the emerging regional framework, it is possible in principle to advance shared objectives of Israel and the Palestinian Authority – to improve the economic situation and welfare of Palestinians, to adequately address the employment needs among the younger generation of Palestinians who are well-educated but frustrated, and at the same time to lay foundations for an atmosphere that will help advance the political process. Furthermore, the regional framework, in its current composition, presumably will create some leeway and flexibility for the

Israeli government so that it can carry out measures work that cannot be implemented at the Israeli–Palestinian bilateral level.

However, the Palestinian leadership adheres to opposing any symbol or process of normalization between Israel and the Arab world, which it sees as a threat to Palestinian national and strategic interests. The fact that the Arab countries have turned their back on the Palestinian leadership and, in effect, on the Palestinian issue, having relegated it to the bottom of their national priorities, has not convinced the Palestinian leadership to change direction. The Arab leaderships, whose representatives attended the summit at Sde Boker, have already chosen: As part of their state considerations, they identify Israel as a vital and important ally. And recently, Israel has added the prestige of Prime Minister Naftali Bennett's mediation between Russia and Ukraine to its assets and international standing.

Even if the Palestinian issue was raised during the summit, we can assume that it was on the level of necessary lip service, and no more. The leaders of the Arab countries, as well as the US, are currently much more concerned about complex regional issues, particularly the activity of Iran and its proxies and the possible impact of the Russia–Ukraine war on the Middle East (such as the rise in oil and wheat prices). Given the decline in the stature of the Palestinian issue on the regional and international agenda, the Palestinians' range of possibilities and influence have also diminished.

Hamas also feels the distress, and it may seek to exploit the month of Ramadan to escalate the security situation in Jerusalem (while avoiding an escalation in the Gaza arena), in an attempt to maintain its position as the defender of the holy places of Islam and as the leader of the armed opposition to Israel, as well as to embarrass the Palestinian Authority again and to solidify its standing among the Palestinian public as an alternative to the PA and Fatah. Such a course of action by Hamas would also serve the Palestinian Authority, which wishes to restore the Palestinian issue to the global and regional agenda by undermining the security situation, but without being seen as bearing the responsibility. Therefore, its leaders looked at the Negev summit with desperation, which illustrated the continued trend – the Palestinian issue is no longer a barrier to rapprochement between Israel and the Arab countries.

### **And Who Did Not Come? Jordan**

#### **Oded Eran**

Jordan did not participate in the Negev Summit, and not because it was not invited. Ostensibly, the Jordanian Foreign Minister had reasons for missing the gathering

– the week before the summit, he attended talks in the Gulf countries and, on the same day as the summit, he participated in King Abdullah’s visit to Ramallah and his meeting there with Abu Mazen, the president of the Palestinian Authority. But these were all excuses, and it is hard not to see them as reflecting a Jordanian set of considerations that sometimes leads to wrong decisions.

If there is a motivating, constitutive, and decisive factor in the Jordanian reality, it is the composition of the kingdom’s population, more than half of which is of Palestinian origin, while its founders and rulers, who constitute a minority, originate from tribes that came from the Arabian Peninsula. Thus, while the Israeli–Palestinian conflict has lost its place among the top issues on the pan-Arab agenda, it still remains at the top of the Jordanian agenda. From the perspective of the heads of the Hashemite regime in Jordan, the most serious existential danger is “the alternative [Palestinian] homeland” – that is, Jordan becoming Palestine.

The factors contributing to the Arab world’s fatigue in dealing with the Palestinian issue include, of course, the Arab Spring, which caused internal disintegration in three Arab League countries; the COVID-19 pandemic, which exacerbated the condition of the Arab countries that do not produce oil and natural gas; and recently, the war in Ukraine, which has caused rising energy and food prices, especially that of wheat. And alongside all of these, Iran’s nuclear and conventional activity has expanded, threatening the security and stability of the region.

Jordan’s almost obsessive focus on the Palestinian issue sabotages the potential inherent in the relations currently being forged between Israel and several Arab countries, most of which participated in the Negev Summit. Israel cannot solve Jordan’s economic troubles, but it can help with easing the critical shortage of water, supplying natural gas, receiving Jordanian exports, and even creating workplaces in certain industries next to the Israel–Jordan border. The economic cooperation between Israel and the Gulf countries opens up additional economic possibilities, while taking advantage of Jordan’s geographical location.

The weak response of the Hashemite Kingdom to the verbal violence of those in Jordan who oppose normalization between Israel and the Arab countries is manifested not only by downplaying the important parts of Jordan’s relations with Israel, but also by avoiding the regional summit. While the focus of the summit was not the Palestinian issue, the summit could promote solutions, even if only partial ones, to this issue too. Jordan’s representation in the summit by its foreign minister – even for just a few hours – could have helped Jordan, without harming

the delicate relations between the Hashemite regime and the Palestinian diaspora in the kingdom itself, as well as between the regime and the Palestinian Authority.