

# How Biden Can Build on the Abraham Accords

By [Peter Berkowitz](#) - RCP Contributor  
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In December 2016, more than two years after the collapse of his efforts to broker a comprehensive peace between Israel and the Palestinians, then-Secretary of State John Kerry discussed the conflict with Atlantic editor Jeffrey Goldberg at the Brookings Institution's prestigious Saban Forum. Kerry concurred with the foreign policy establishment's long-held view that Israel's only route to peace with Arab states -- notwithstanding the Jewish state's separate agreements with Egypt and Jordan -- was through a deal that brought a Palestinian state into existence. "There will be no separate peace between Israel and the Arab world," Kerry [declared](#). "I want to make that very clear to all of you."

Kerry acknowledged that his unequivocal judgment was not universal: "I've heard several prominent politicians in Israel sometimes saying, well, the Arab world is in a different place now, we just have to reach out to them, and we can work some things with the Arab world and we'll deal with the Palestinians." Kerry then dismissed the Israeli view out of hand. "No, no, no, and no. I can tell you that [was] reaffirmed even in the last week as I have talked to leaders of the Arab community. There will be no advance and separate peace with the Arab world without the Palestinian process and Palestinian peace. Everybody needs to understand that. That is a hard reality."

In August 2020, Israel, Bahrain, and the United Arab Emirates, assisted by the Trump administration, proved John Kerry and the foreign policy establishment wrong. The Abraham Accords -- which Sudan joined last month, and which Israel and Morocco supplemented with a separate agreement two months ago -- charted a new course after two decades of failed efforts by American diplomats to secure a conflict-ending settlement between Israel and the Palestinians. Moreover, in contrast to the cold peace that has prevailed between Israel and Egypt since 1979 and the cold peace that has held between Israel and Jordan since 1994, Israel, the UAE, and Bahrain have enthusiastically embraced their normalization of relations.

The Abraham Accords are rooted in shared interests. Israel, the UAE, and Bahrain are determined to counter the Islamic Republic of Iran's pursuit of nuclear weapons, its export of Islamic extremism throughout the Middle East, and its quest for regional hegemony. At the same time, the two Arab Gulf states and Israel see extraordinary opportunities to develop commercial ties and launch educational and cultural exchanges.

To build on this achievement by promoting stability and freedom throughout the region, the Biden administration must overcome the grip of conventional wisdom. The initial signs are not encouraging.

On the very August day that the United States, Israel, and the United Arab Emirates issued a [joint statement](#) announcing the normalization of relations, several Brookings experts [opined](#) that the diplomatic accomplishment harmed or overlooked the Palestinians. One Brookings fellow maintained, “The losers, as often, are the Palestinians.” Another asserted that Palestinians would be “the big losers.” A third contended that the agreement was a “cynical” deal that demonstrated “that Arab authoritarian regimes can’t be bothered to pretend they care about Palestinian rights.” A month later, Atlantic editor Goldberg [agreed](#) that the Palestinians were “the big losers.”

Despite the discouraging experience of four successive U.S. administrations -- two Democratic, two Republican -- knowledgeable progressive figures held fast to the dream of a comprehensive peace between Israel and the Palestinians lurking just around the corner if only the United States could summon the will and ingenuity. Veteran diplomats and longtime observers seemed unable to imagine the benefits that full and warm diplomatic relations between Israel and additional Arab states could bring to the Palestinians, starting with the variety of gains from free-flowing commerce between Israel and Gulf Arab states.

But not all.

In a September Washington Post [piece](#), David Makovsky, a fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, joined with Daniel Shapiro, who served as President Obama’s ambassador to Israel, to find in the Abraham Accords an opportunity to challenge the conventional wisdom. “History and common sense,” they wrote, “both show that Arab states that maintain diplomatic relations with Israel play a more active role in supporting Palestinian aspirations than those who do not.”

In a recently released Washington Institute monograph, “[Building Bridges for Peace: U.S. Policy Toward Arab States, Palestinians, and Israel](#),” Makovsky goes further, exploring concrete ways the Abraham Accords can set the stage for improving the lives of Palestinians. However, a sober evaluation of the constraints on diplomacy, he cautions, is essential. The Biden administration, facing “enormous tasks ... at home and around the world,” will have limited resources to address the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, he acknowledges. And in late March, Israel faces its fourth election in two years. Meanwhile, in the West Bank, the Palestinian Authority continues to operate the world’s most fervently indulged kleptocracy while in Gaza Hamas maintains an Islamist theocracy dedicated to Israel’s destruction. Given the destabilizing challenges all around, Makovsky discerns little near-term prospect for a “final-status deal.”

But he does propose a constructive path forward. Last summer’s breakthrough, he contends, provides a chance to “shrink” the conflict. This echoes Israeli author Micah Goodman’s analysis. In April 2019 -- well before the Abraham Accords had been contemplated -- in an Atlantic [piece](#) and again in an [update](#) last month in the magazine in light of the Abraham Accords, Goodman made the case for setting aside the dream of a near-term comprehensive peace in favor of focusing on incremental steps that simultaneously promote Palestinian freedom and prosperity while preserving Israeli security.

A senior adviser in 2013-2014 to Martin Indyk, then-Secretary Kerry's special envoy for Israeli-Palestinian negotiations, Makovsky is determined to keep the old dream alive. The establishment of a Palestinian state that lives in peace with Israel should remain, in his view, the organizing principle of American diplomacy in the conflict even as he recognizes that realization of the dream must be reconceived as a long-term undertaking. The "hopeful shift in regional dynamics," he writes, "presents opportunities for Washington both to widen the arc of Arab-Israeli peace and to use that progress to reinvigorate Israeli-Palestinian peacemaking."

Instead of the all-or-nothing approach characteristic of his former State Department boss and of the foreign policy establishment in general, Makovsky urges the Biden administration to adopt a strategy of "gradualism." Such a strategy would "steer clear of the core issues." It would foster "positive trends in Arab-Israel state-to-state cooperation." And it would "minimize the Israeli-Palestinian conflict ... while preserving the two-state framework endorsed by the last four U.S. administrations -- Clinton, Bush, Obama, and Trump." The main elements of Makovsky's gradualism include recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's capital and reaffirmation of negotiation by the parties as the means to determine the city's final borders; assistance to the Palestinian Authority to reform its domestic governance and diplomacy, and to develop the West Bank's economy; regular talks between the parties to achieve interim understandings; and consultation on Hamas-controlled Gaza.

These are reasonable steps to shrink the conflict. To carry them out and to realize gradualism's full promise, however, Makovsky's approach must address three issues that his monograph overlooks.

First, the Biden administration must be persuaded that the Abraham Accords have transformed the dynamics of Middle East politics. Largely staffed with former Democratic Party officials who cling to the old catechism, the new administration has yet to emancipate itself from the disproven conventional wisdom that the only policy toward the Israeli-Palestinian conflict worth pursuing is one of near-term comprehensive peace.

Second, the private sector must be encouraged to invest in the West Bank. Instead of spearheading government-led development projects, the United States should help create conditions favorable to private investment in the territories many Israelis call by their biblical names, Judea and Samaria. Rather than government officials and national bureaucracies, it should be entrepreneurs, financiers, and philanthropists -- from the Gulf states, Israel, the United States, and, of no small importance, the areas under Palestinian Authority jurisdiction -- who should be given room to identify and pursue profitable and useful ventures that create opportunities and improve the Palestinians' condition.

Third, Israel's broader security perspective must be taken into account in fashioning reasonable concessions and compromises. Makovsky mentions the grave threat posed by Iran. One must add that Hezbollah has positioned more than 120,000 rockets and missiles -- all of which are meant for Israel -- in Lebanese civilian areas and structures while constantly increasing and upgrading its armaments through a supply chain originating in Tehran and passing through Syria. Hezbollah's massive and increasingly sophisticated aerial arsenal gives it the capacity to strike

most of the Jewish state's population and accurately hit vital military installations. In the Gaza Strip, Hamas's supply of rockets and missiles is less formidable but of concern, particularly in the event of war with Iran.

To complete the break from the failed past -- and improve the long-term prospects for peace for all parties -- it will be necessary to implement genuinely incremental measures that, without prejudging the most difficult issues, improve Palestinian lives while preserving Israeli security.

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