

Abraham Accords Can Ease Israeli-Palestinian Conflict

COMMENTARY

By [Peter Berkowitz](#) - RCP Contributor
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TEL AVIV—Last Tuesday, Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennet announced his intention to dissolve the fragile eight-party coalition government that he has led since June 2021. As it heads for a fifth election in three-and-a-half years, Israel will continue to reap the fruits of the Abraham Accords. And the Israeli-Palestinian conflict will persist. The next elected prime minister should leverage the accords to ease the conflict.

This summer marks the second anniversary of the Abraham Accords, which normalized relations between Israel and the United Arab Emirates, and between Israel and Bahrain. Promoting security, prosperity, and toleration in a notoriously volatile region, the historic agreements brokered by the Trump administration in the summer of 2020 – which led to normalization agreements within a few months between Israel and Sudan, Morocco, and Kosovo – represent a huge success for U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East.

The Palestinian Authority, however, remains dead-set opposed to the accords while friends of the Palestinian cause condemn the agreements as a betrayal of Palestinians' rights and interests. This all-too-typical rejectionism should not deter the parties to the Abraham Accords. Even with minimal Palestinian cooperation, Israel, its Gulf partners, and the United States can enhance regional stability

by taking steps to promote Palestinian self-government and prosperity consistent with Israel's baseline security imperatives.

In mid-June 2020, United Arab Emirates Washington Ambassador Yousef Al Otaiba published an unprecedented [op-ed](#) on the front page of the Hebrew language daily, Yediot Ahronoth, warning Israel against annexing parts of the West Bank. The column was prompted by statements from Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu who, in the months following the PA's dismissal of the January 2020 Trump administration peace plan, had increasingly spoken of applying Israeli sovereignty to parts of Judea and Samaria. Such a step, wrote Al Otaiba, "will certainly and immediately upend Israeli aspirations for improved security, economic and cultural ties with the Arab world and with UAE." Warning relations pointed toward formal normalization, Al Otaiba indicated, but annexation would send an "unmistakable signal" that the Arab states could not rely on Israel.

By way of response, Netanyahu embraced the idea of normalization in exchange for setting aside talk of annexation.

On a sunny September day at a White House South Lawn ceremony three months after the publication of Al Otaiba's op-ed – and thanks to the diplomatic efforts of White House Senior Adviser Jared Kushner and his assistant Avi Berkowitz (no relation to the author) – Bahrain, the UAE, Israel, and the U.S. signed the Abraham Accords. The diplomatic breakthrough was grounded in cold security calculations about the common threat posed by Iran. It was propelled by abundant opportunities for commerce and trade. And it was nourished by a growing appreciation among the parties of a shared root in Abrahamic faith.

[The Abraham Accords Peace Institute](#) (AAPI), which seeks "to strengthen the new bonds created through the Abraham Accords and ensure that these relationships achieve their fullest potential," provides a monthly tally of the dividends paid by the agreements. Last month, the institute notes,

Bahrain hosted the first Israeli Independence Day celebration in the Persian Gulf, the UAE became the first Arab country to hold a ceremony to mark Israel's Memorial Day, and the UAE and Israel signed a Comprehensive Economic Partnership.

These developments follow the numerous achievements laid out in AAPI's 2021 [progress report](#). For example, Israeli ambassadors took up posts in Bahrain and the UAE, and Bahraini and UAE ambassadors arrived in Israel. In November 2021, Israel signed a major security agreement with Morocco. Last year, Israel's trade with Bahrain went from nonexistent to \$6.5 million, trade with the UAE soared five-fold to more than \$1 billion, and trade with Morocco jumped by 84%. In addition, collaborative agreements were signed by Israel's Bar-Ilan University and the UAE's Gulf Medical University, by Tel Aviv University's School of Management and Casablanca's National School of Business and Management, and by Hebrew University of Jerusalem and Morocco's Mohammed VI Polytechnic University. Much more is taking place including in the fields of health, sports, and the arts.

Despite the abundant good news, many critics see the normalization agreements as providing cover for the perpetuation of injustice. In a recent Foreign Affairs article, "[Why the Abraham Accords Fall Short](#)," Carnegie Endowment of International Peace Fellow Zaha Hassan and Carnegie Vice President of Studies Marwan Muasher contend that the accords damaged the region by sustaining Israeli oppression of Palestinians.

"The truth is that the accords have not advanced peace in the Middle East because Israel's aim in signing the accords was to redirect world attention away from its military occupation, not to end it," they assert. The Trump administration peace plan, according to the Carnegie team's sinister assessment, "offered a roadmap for how Israel might maintain permanent control over the West Bank." Furthermore, "the Abraham Accords and the regional development projects they hope to foster will not bring economic relief to the donor-dependent Palestinians," contend Hassan and

Muasher. “That is because the accords do nothing to alleviate Israeli restrictions on Palestinian movement and their access to land and natural resources.”

Such tendentious claims – which presuppose that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict stands at the center of Middle East politics and that unless Palestinians’ maximal demands are met, the region must stand still – reflect the all-or-nothing stance that has for decades impeded Palestinian progress. Contrary to Hassan and Muasher’s assertion that Israel embraced the Abraham Accords to disguise its reign over Judea and Samaria, it was the Iran threat and commercial opportunities that impelled Bahrain and the UAE to break with the past and establish official diplomatic ties with Israel.

The Carnegie colleagues’ assertion that the Trump peace plan was designed to secure Israel’s control over the West Bank, moreover, flies in the face of the plan’s explicit call for a Palestinian state in 70% of Judea and Samaria as well as in portions of the Negev that Israel would transfer to the PA. And Hassan and Muasher ignore that many restrictions that Israel imposes on West Bank Palestinian movement and access stem from security threats that PA President Mahmoud Abbas – now serving the 18th year of the four-year term to which he was elected in 2005 – has been ineffective in handling when he hasn’t been complicit in fomenting.

Notwithstanding Palestinian intransigence, signatories to the Abraham Accords should take steps to, in the words of Israeli commentator Micah Goodman, “[shrink the Israeli-Palestinian conflict](#).” They could start with building roads, bridges, and tunnels to directly connect the many noncontiguous parts of the West Bank largely under PA control – the areas designated A and B by the Oslo Accords. This enhanced transportation network, which would become part of the PA, would improve Palestinian mobility by reducing the need for Israeli checkpoints while maintaining Israeli security.

Other measures to shrink the conflict include providing more West Bank land for Palestinian building to accommodate population growth, enhancing the Allenby Bridge border crossing on the

Jordan river to make it easier for Palestinians to reach Amman's international airport and travel abroad, promoting economic development throughout the West Bank, and enabling Palestinians to transport goods for international trade more efficiently to Israeli ports in Haifa and Ashdod.

The signatories to the Abraham Accords have a variety of roles to play. Israel must oversee construction teams, consult with security experts, overcome bureaucratic red tape and short-term political jockeying, and coordinate a variety of government offices. The Gulf countries must invest. And the United States must practice effective diplomacy. The more PA involvement the better, but little is required. The overarching goal is to improve the quality of ordinary Palestinians' day-to-day lives without diminishing Israeli security and prejudicing the final status determination of Judea and Samaria.

Because it would benefit Israelis, Palestinians, and the region, taking advantage of the Abraham Accords to shrink the conflict should be a priority for whatever governing coalition emerges from Israel's current political turmoil.

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