

The Abraham Accords

A Turning Point in the Middle East – A New Chance for the EU

By Kerstin Müller

September 15, 2022, marks the second anniversary of the signing of the Abraham Accords between then-Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and the foreign ministers of the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Bahrain, as well as then-U.S. President Donald Trump. At the time, no one had suspected that these agreements would generate the momentum they created—a momentum arguably no other agreement between Israel and its neighbors has achieved since the Oslo Accords in 1993 and later the negotiations at Camp David in 2000.

Additional agreements were added with Sudan on October 23 and with Morocco on December 20, 2020; states such as Oman plan to join in the future. Most importantly, the signing ceremony was followed by numerous high-level bilateral and trilateral meetings in the region. Each of these meetings was accompanied by high-level delegations and resulted in concrete agreements and understandings to expand relations in terms of economic and security, as well as in the areas of tourism, culture, and technology.

For the time being, the high-level conference in the Negev on March 27 and 28, 2022 was the high point of the process initiated by the Abraham Accords. At the invitation of Israeli Foreign Minister Lapid, the foreign ministers of Egypt, Bahrain, the UAE, Morocco, and the United States met to exchange views on international and regional issue; an event which—had international politics not been dominated by Putin's war in Ukraine—would certainly have captured the attention of the international headlines even more.

The agreements themselves are very simple.¹ Nev-

ertheless, they represent a fundamental paradigm shift from the Middle East policy of recent decades, turning the region's previous strategic environment from head to toe. In the past, international Middle East policy was primarily shaped by the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The 1993 Oslo Accords had stipulated that a Palestinian state would be established after a five-year interim period, which has not been implemented to date. Most Arab states continued to regard Israel as a „foreign body“ in the Middle East and disputed its right to exist in the region. At the latest since the Saudi peace initiative of 2002, the parameters of all international efforts to resolve the conflict have been A) the recognition of Israel's right to exist and B) a normalization of relations only in exchange for the creation of a Palestinian state. For these reasons, the peace with Egypt (1979) and with Jordan (1994) always remained a „cold peace“.

Against this background, the paradigm shift that the agreements represent becomes clear: They allow a normalization of Israel's relations with its neighboring states without requiring the establishment of a Palestinian state and Israel's withdrawal from the occupied territories.

No wonder, then, that the Palestinians sharply rejected the agreements and see themselves on the losing side of the process. It's a fact that, for the time being, the agreements further marginalize them. This may also be the reason why the EU commented on the agreements very cautiously and has not yet found its own approach to engage with the new process. However, if one looks at the agreements in detail, as well as the numerous agreements that were concluded as a result of the initial signing, they have the potential to develop the newly estab-

lished relations into a genuine strategic partnership between Israel and the Sunni states of the region.²

The Realignment of Priorities in the Middle East

The signing of the Abraham Accords did not come as a surprise. The process of diplomatic rapprochement between Israel and the Arab states involved began long before Trump took office, picking up speed after Iran began to systematically expand its hegemony in the region since the second Iraq war.

Priorities in the Middle East began to shift fundamentally, and the Sunni-Shiite conflict has since shaped disputes in the region more than the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. With the help of its proxies, the Shiite regime in Tehran is waging proxy wars against Sunni states such as Saudi Arabia in Syria, Yemen and Lebanon, thus expanding its supremacy.

The start of the P5+1 international negotiations with Iran over its nuclear program in November 2013 to July 2015, resulting in the so-called JCPOA, brought Arab states and Israel even closer. They shared their skepticism about an agreement with Iran and the assessment that the EU and the then U.S. administration under Barack Obama were underestimating Iran. To this day, they emphasize not only the nuclear program but also the danger of the ballistic missile program, which is not part of the international negotiations. The brutal Syrian civil war too, which has been ongoing since 2011, has further shifted the regional focus toward the Gulf states.

The U.S.'s creeping withdrawal from the Middle East due to its reorientation toward Asia, their pivot to Asia, has since made the need for closer regional cooperation even more urgent.³ This trend has further strengthened the will to forge a counter-alliance to be able to represent common interests more decisively vis-à-vis the U.S. and other states. In this changing strategic context, Israel thus became a welcome partner for the Arab states. True to the motto: „The enemy of my enemy is my friend,“ all sides were now ready for an open cooperation—the birth of the Abraham Accords.

Strategic Agenda for the Middle East - Economic and Military Cooperation

The main focus of the Abraham agreements is on expanding economic and military cooperation. In addition to the regional goals of peace and stability, the agreement with the UAE also covers finance and investment, science and technology, tourism, culture and education, energy and the environment, as well as agriculture and food security.⁴ Mutual understanding of each other is to be developed through cultural and scientific exchange programs, especially for younger generations. Programs to combat „extremism, hatred and terrorism“ have also been put on the agenda. To this end, a permanent „High-Level Joint Forum for Peace and Co-Existence“ is planned to be established.

The regional goals of a „Strategic Agenda for the Middle East“ for expanding „regional diplomatic, trade, stability and other cooperation“ sound quite ambitious.⁵ However, given the numerous follow-up meetings and agreements, the partners seem willing to implement them. An indication of the expansion of trade cooperation that has taken place is the fact that the trade volume (\$180 million volume in 2020) has already risen to \$1 billion in 2021. It includes mainly diamonds, industrial goods, tourism and services.

Herein lies the great opportunity for the region.⁶ With economic integration, an increase in the region's GDPs can be achieved, which would result in more stability and thus could attract international investors. So far, the Middle East is far behind any other region in the world in that regard. For comparison, while 66 percent of trade in the EU is with other EU countries, in the Middle East it is a mere 13 percent. RAND estimates that a plurilateral free trade agreement among the countries in the region could mean a GDP growth of 2 to 3 percent for each of the Abraham countries.⁷ In that regard, the free trade agreement between Israel and the UAE signed on April 1, 2022, marked a beginning. The Abraham agreements, which were occasionally somewhat belittled by the EU, have set in motion a dynamic process that could even go far beyond what was

once envisaged on paper.

A number of developments have already promoted in the area of enhanced security cooperation as well. In October 2021, the head of the UAE Air Force participated for the first time ever as an observer in an Israeli maneuver. And now that Israel is allowed to lead a liaison at U.S. CENTCOM, there have been joint military exercises here as well, including a maritime maneuver in November 2021 that included officers from Bahrain and the UAE.⁸ But it is not just joint maneuvers that take place. When a Huthi attack on Abu Dhabi took place in January 2022, Israeli President Herzog was there on a state visit. He then offered the UAE military equipment such as missile defense systems and drones.⁹ An agreement soon followed.¹⁰ In February 2022, Israeli Defense Minister Gantz signed the first defense cooperation agreement with Bahrain.¹¹

The U.S. interest in the Abraham Accords

It is also clear, however, that without intensive diplomatic efforts by the U.S., the agreements would not have been concluded. The Trump administration agreed to supply F-35 fighter jets to the UAE.

Morocco meanwhile demanded that the U.S. recognize its sovereignty over the Western Sahara and Sudan that it would be removed from the U.S. terror list.¹² Some experts believe that the expansion of this security cooperation is based on greater fundamental interest to the U.S.¹³ Since the U.S. plans to gradually withdraw from the Middle East in the long term, it needs partners on the ground who will continue to represent American interests.¹⁴

In fact, the U.S. administration of Biden has welcomed the Abraham Accords from the beginning and is working intensively to expand them. This was visible in the fact that Secretary of State Blinken participated in the Negev Conference and sought a demonstrative unity with the regional actors present.¹⁵ At the press conference that followed, he emphasized that „[T]he United States has and will continue to strongly support a process that is transforming this region and beyond.“¹⁶ He also asserted that the U.S. would help the states of the region in combating “Iran and its proxies”. Blinken’s reference to Iran served to restore confidence in the conference participants, who are skeptical of a new agreement with Iran. That the Democratic U.S. Administration has initially been seeking a reissuance of the JCPOA



is without doubt, even though the lack of progress in the negotiations is increasingly clouding the picture.

With the upcoming Midterm elections in the United States and with the ongoing protests in Iran because of the death of the 22 year old Mahsa Amini in custody it becomes increasingly likely that the negotiations are heading for a standstill.¹⁷ In order to react to the brutal suppression of the protests by the regime the EU decided on sanctions against Iran. However, it is in a way remarkable that negotiations were continued despite the invasion of Ukraine by Russia, which is part of the JCPOA negotiations—a development that many states in the region find highly concerning. For their part, the participants in the Negev Conference, in consultation with each other, have called for U.S. security guarantees should a deal be struck with Iran. Israel and the UAE made demands for greater intelligence cooperation and an upgrade of air defense systems.¹⁸

This serves to show that the alliance benefits not only the Abraham signatories in the region, but also the U.S., that are enabled to coordinate its security interests better with them. Moreover, this relates to the involvement of other states in the region too, such as Egypt and Turkey. Thus, Egypt was not only present at the Negev Conference. There was already a coordination meeting between Egypt, the UAE, and Israel in Sharm El-Sheikh beforehand.¹⁹ Israel's relations with Turkey, which have cooled since 2018, are also being readjusted. In August, both countries announced that they would again restore full diplomatic relations,²⁰ with Israel appointing its first ambassador to Turkey in four years in September.²¹ Again, this development is not only in the Israeli interest, but also in the interest of the U.S., as Turkey is a NATO ally.

Criticism of the agreements: Palestinians on the Offside - Saudi Arabia on board

The main problem with the agreements lays in the fact that the Palestinians have been excluded from the Abraham Accord. So far, the normalization process is not only bypassing them, but with the change

in political priorities, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has once again been marginalized. The Palestinians therefore see themselves as the losing side of the agreement and described the agreements as a betrayal of the Palestinian cause and a “stab in the back.”²²

However, the Palestinian issue has not only been perceived as a burden by the Arab states since the Abraham Accords. This was made clear by various statements made by Saudi Arabia, a major player in the region. Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman is known to have made several statements calling on the Palestinians to be more willing to compromise. He told the U.S. magazine *The Atlantic* that Saudi-Arabia does „look at Israel as an enemy,” but rather as a “potential ally, with many interests that we can pursue together.”, before going on to say that he „hope[d] that the conflict between the Israelis and the Palestinians is solved.”²³

Given that Saudi Arabia and Israel still have no diplomatic relations, these are astonishing statements. The Abraham Accords would not have come into existence without Saudi Arabia's consent. Neither would Bahrain have become a party to the agreement or would the first historic flight from Tel Aviv to Abu Dhabi in August 2022 have crossed over Saudi territory. Meanwhile, the U.S. is seeking to further engage Saudi Arabia in the normalization process. Secretary of State Blinken called the Saudi foreign minister just hours after the Negev conference to inform him of the meeting. Of course, there is still a long way to go before relations with Saudi Arabia are normalized. Officially, Riyadh is sticking to the 2002 peace initiative formula. But it is known that Crown Prince bin Salman is much more open to normalization with Israel than his father King Salman, even without a Palestinian state. Saudi Arabia might also be willing to use the Palestinians as a bargaining chip for its own interests, as it is said the Saudis have handed over a wish list with requests to the USA.²⁴

It is domestically difficult, especially for the new democratic U.S. administration, to simply go about business as usual with Saudi Arabia. It was only during the election campaign that the Democrats

announced that they wanted to reassess the relationship with the kingdom, due to human rights violations and the murder of journalist Jamal Kashoggi. Human rights issues cannot simply be neglected.²⁵ Nevertheless, it is obvious that the Democratic U.S. administration intends to integrate Saudi Arabia into the alliance in the long term—its security interests in the region are just too important.

Similarly, a Democratic U.S. administration cannot simply brush aside the demand for a two-state solution, which all Democratic predecessor administrations have intensively advocated. However, the Biden administration itself does not intend to make its own diplomatic push in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Seasoned experts such as Martin Indyk and others advise against it. Rather, the conflict „requires management, because conditions simply do not exist for its resolution.“²⁶ Therefore, a U.S. initiative without the actors on the ground demanding it, is not recommended. Against this backdrop, the

Abraham Accords are currently the only policy process shaping the conflict. And even though Blinken noted at a joint press conference that this process cannot substitute a two-state solution, the accords enjoy the full support of the U.S. government.

Role of the EU - Staying on the sidelines or becoming a player again?

So far, the EU seems to be a mere observer in the normalization process. The Union’s first reaction to the Abraham Accord have been very restrained, emphasizing that the agreements cannot replace negotiations for a two-state solution and that both sides should return to the negotiating table. However, this expectation seems unrealistic against the backdrop of Israel’s successful integration into the region and the steady progress of the normalization process. Recently the EU published a more positive statement vis a vis the Abraham Accords.²⁷



Rather, Prime Minister Bennett, the head of the settler party, is trying to sidestep the issue of a Palestinian state. This was the case at the Negev Conference, where the participants discussed ways to improve the economic situation of Palestinians, but not diplomatic initiatives. This reflects the compromise struck by the current government in Israel which, as of this moment, still consists of eight parties and encompasses the entire political spectrum from the far left through the Center Party to the right, including an Arab party. While it is unclear what coalition will assume power after the parliamentary elections on November 1, it is highly unlikely that any new diplomatic initiatives can be expected by the new incoming government. Actors on both the Israeli and the Palestinian side are so deadlocked that any external initiative that focuses on a two-state solution—and even more so an initiative by the EU—is doomed to fail. This explains why the EU seems to be so restrained in its reaction. Considering the decades-long blockade in the peace process, the Union seems to be at its wit's end. It is the last remaining supporter of the Palestinians, but it seems powerless and ineffective because the EU has not been a player in the region for a while now.

This begs the question of how the EU can once again move from being sidelined to becoming a relevant player. Considering that the Americans want to withdraw from the Middle East in the long run, the EU would be needed as an actor in the region. The dynamic speed in which the alliance of the states of the Abraham Accords is currently developing underlines that it is not only time for the Palestinians to face up to the new realities in the Middle East, but also the EU and Germany.²⁸

The EU and Germany must face new realities in the Middle East

On the one hand, this concerns the two-state solution, which will likely no longer be realized as envisaged in Oslo.²⁹ At this time, the idea of two states existing side by side separately from one another is unrealistic, since the most important political conditions for its implementation no longer exist.³⁰ Arab states in the region now have other priorities and

are fully occupied with pushing back the hegemonic efforts of the Shiite enemy in Tehran, while the United States, too, are pursuing other priorities and have turned to „managing“ of the conflict.

The most important actors on the ground, first and foremost Israel, are caught in the status quo. Above all, the populations on both sides no longer believe that a two-state solution will bring an „end to the conflict“. Thus, at least for the Israelis, the most important motivation for new negotiations and a peace agreement is missing. Even in the unlikely event that the Israeli side could reach an agreement with the ruling Fatah, on the Palestinian side Hamas remains unwilling to reach a peace deal and will likely counter any perceivable agreement with attacks and assaults from Gaza.

Against this backdrop, the EU must finally begin to reposition itself strategically.³¹ It should be open to a dialogue on alternative approaches and modifications. For a long time now, actors on both sides of civil society have been working on new paths and models,³² such as those of a confederation³³ or federation. What both models have in common is that they do not call Israel's Jewish majority into question, but take into account the changed realities on the ground. One of these is the „Two states, One homeland“ initiative.³⁴ Even architects of the two-state solution and representatives of the Geneva initiative, such as Yossi Beilin, are now backing away from the Oslo agreements and favor the concept of a confederation, stating that the withdrawal of over 300,000 settlers would just be too unrealistic.³⁵

Now at the latest, the EU and Germany should open up to debates and new ideas without regarding the concept of strict separation as having no alternative. New proposals that seek a peaceful balance between Israelis and Palestinians, but at the same time are much closer to the realities on the ground do exist. For them, it would be key to establish contact with the civil societies, to promote discussion groups and projects, and to involve all population groups, including moderate settlers as well as Palestinians from the West Bank and Gaza. However, the EU has so far refused to seek out such engagements

and continues to rely solely on the official representatives of the Palestinian Authority for talks—despite the fact that the Palestinian authority has lost much of its prestige among its population and has long since ceased to be regarded as its legitimate representative by many Palestinians.

Opportunity for a new strategic orientation of the European Union

The Abraham agreements offer starting points for a new strategic orientation toward the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The agreements with the UAE and Bahrain explicitly state their intention to seek a peaceful solution. Considering the intensive economic cooperation between the new-found partners, there is an opportunity to design trilateral projects between Israel, the Palestinians and Arab states such as the UAE and Bahrain, as well as to allow the Palestinians to participate in the normalization process. While this would have the approval of the Israeli side, the Palestinians would likely need some convincing. However, the Palestinians will not be able to refuse the economic advantages of the normalization of relations in the long run. The European Union could therefore consider setting up a fund to promote projects within the framework of the Abraham Accords. Aside from economic projects, this should include and further develop the promotion of social projects, ideas for which are already laid out in the Abraham Agreements and ranging from culture to sports, as well as the promotion of mutual youth exchanges. Other topics for cooperation include energy security, water, and agriculture. A flagship project for this is the energy and water project agreed upon by Jordan, the UAE and Israel in November 2021: While the UAE will build a large solar power plant

in Jordan that will supply electricity to Israel, Jordan will receive twice as much fresh water from Israel as is available to the country today.³⁶

Projects like these, that combine modern technological knowledge with regional needs, should be further developed and promoted within the Abraham framework, as they are also of interest for the Palestinians. In Germany, the new German Ministry of Economy and Climate could take the lead in such cooperation which seeks to promote climate protection and the economy in the region while strengthening peaceful coexistence.

One thing is certain: If the EU and Germany want to play a greater role in the region in the long term, they must reposition themselves strategically. They not only need to be more open to alternative conflict resolution proposals, but also rethink old and outdated concepts as until now, there has been a lack of willingness to discuss these old concepts anew and put them to the test. Daring to engage in an open diplomatic dialogue with new interlocutors about new ideas is therefore key. Diplomacy has always been one of the EU's strengths. The Union must return to its diplomatic strength and at the same time be open to new ideas if it wants to play a role in the Middle East again in the future.

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