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# A Saudi Accord: Implications for Israel-Palestine Relations

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# Executive Summary

The Biden administration and Israel's Netanyahu government have both expressed support for the idea of a trilateral agreement in which Saudi Arabia would normalize diplomatic relations with Israel in exchange for the United States providing significant benefits to Saudi Arabia, such as security guarantees. A major selling point has been the claim that such an agreement could pave the way to settling the bitter Israeli-Palestinian conflict, which has again erupted into a central threat to peace in the Middle East.

However, given the experience of the Trump administration's Abraham Accords, which normalized relations between four Arab states and Israel with the hope of moving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict to a resolution, deep skepticism is warranted.

The Abraham Accords did nothing to advance Palestinian-Israeli conflict resolution. Even before October 7, there was no hint of Israeli moderation in response to the accords. Since October 7, we have witnessed the largest Palestinian terrorist attack in Israeli history, followed by Israel's destruction of Gaza and the killing of thousands of Palestinians in response. This conflict risks destabilizing the entire Middle East.

This brief reviews the relevant history and incentives around the claimed relationship between Israeli-Palestinian conflict resolution and Israeli-Arab normalization agreements. It concludes that a U.S.-brokered normalization agreement with Saudi Arabia would be counterproductive to Israeli-Palestinian peace.

Indeed, recent history suggests that Saudi Arabia and the United States would be wasting potential leverage for influencing Israeli policy and that the regional approach unhelpfully diverts attention away from the core of the Arab-Israeli conflict, Israel's occupation of Palestinian territory.

Rather than pursue the already failed approach of seeking peace through the normalization of relations between Israel and third-party countries, a better route would include using U.S. leverage to directly drive Israeli-Palestinian peace. To do this, the U.S. should:

- 1) Use its leverage through military aid to secure a permanent ceasefire in Gaza as a matter of urgency;
- 2) Refocus on the core issues of Israeli-Palestinian peace, such as occupation, and demand genuine, substantive concessions from the Israeli government; and
- 3) Fully integrate the use of U.S. leverage, such as arms sales and military assistance, into the pursuit of these goals.

## Introduction

The Biden administration and Israel's Netanyahu government have expressed support for the idea of a trilateral U.S.–Israeli–Saudi normalization agreement. Both would get a signature diplomatic achievement and further solidify the anti-Iran coalition. But they differ greatly on an Israeli concession that could be part of such a package. The United States apparently wants Israel to commit to a two-state solution; the Israeli government strongly opposes it.<sup>1</sup>

Of course, this is not the first time a U.S. president has sought an Israeli agreement with Arab states that were not central to Arab-Israeli wars, a normalization pathway rather than a peace treaty. The Trump administration negotiated the 2020 Abraham Accords, a process that ultimately resulted in Israeli normalization with four Arab countries:

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<sup>1</sup> Aamer Madhani and Zeke Miller, "Biden and Netanyahu have finally talked, but their visions still clash for ending Israel-Hamas war," *Associated Press*, January 19, 2024, <https://apnews.com/article/biden-netanyahu-relationship-israel-hamas-war-96b178189e2124adfed0971758b0491>; and Jacob Magid, "Knesset overwhelmingly passes motion rejecting Palestinian statehood, days before PM's US trip," *Times of Israel*, July 18, 2024, [https://www.timesofisrael.com/liveblog\\_entry/knesset-overwhelmingly-passes-motion-rejecting-palestinian-statehood-days-before-pms-us-trip/](https://www.timesofisrael.com/liveblog_entry/knesset-overwhelmingly-passes-motion-rejecting-palestinian-statehood-days-before-pms-us-trip/).

Bahrain, Morocco, Sudan, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE).<sup>2</sup> The basic idea is that such regional agreements, drawing on more distant Arab states, will bypass what are considered inconvenient Palestinian demands. In the long run, this type of regional agreement working from the outside-in will transform Palestinians as they fear being left behind or harmlessly relegate their opposition to the sidelines as the region integrates and they cry foul.

However, the historical record of the Abraham Accords tells a different story: the accords did nothing to advance Palestinian-Israeli conflict resolution. The conflict did not fade away; neither Hamas nor Israel's Likud-led government was positively transformed to embrace cooperation and normalization. Instead, the last nine months have witnessed a massive, deadly Hamas attack on Israel and its citizens, followed by Israel's destruction of Gaza and many of the Palestinian people therein.

This brief reviews the history of the Abraham Accords, including the claims of how it was supposed to benefit Palestinian-Israeli conflict resolution. It assesses reasons the proponents' claims have not come to fruition and concludes with the negative lessons for a potential U.S.–Israeli–Saudi agreement:

- Saudi Arabia and the United States would waste potential leverage for influencing Israeli policy.
- The regional approach unhelpfully diverts attention away from the core of the Arab-Israeli conflict – Israel-Palestine – risking future violent flare-ups.
- The regional approach embraces a model for stability unsupported by historical evidence.

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<sup>2</sup> For the text of the Abraham Accords declaration and the bilateral agreements, see <https://www.state.gov/the-abraham-accords/>.

## The Abraham Accords and their potential

What can we make of the Abraham Accords as a tool for conflict resolution?<sup>3</sup> On the surface, the agreement has been highly touted. Former President Donald J. Trump claims it as one of his signature diplomatic achievements. President Joseph R. Biden, who broke with Trump on some foreign policy issues, not only supported the Abraham Accords, but his administration tried to follow the same model by extending it to the Israeli-Saudi realm. Biden officials “enthusiastically pursued” additional normalization.<sup>4</sup>

At the White House signing ceremony on September 15, 2020, Trump promised deep peace: “After decades of division and conflict, we mark the dawn of a new Middle East.” He added: “Together these agreements will serve as the foundation for a comprehensive peace across the entire region.” Trump also said, “Today’s signing sets history on a new course.” Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s claims were not quite as sweeping, but he was still quite ambitious: Ultimately, the Abraham Accords “can end the Arab Israeli conflict once and for all.” He also said, “Long after the pandemic is gone, the peace we make today will endure.”<sup>5</sup> In an interview shortly after the signing, then-U.S. Ambassador to Israel David M. Friedman, was quite optimistic: “When the dust settles, within months or a year, the Israeli-Arab conflict will be over.”<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> This brief does not evaluate all the aims of the Abraham Accords or weigh its total impact to date. For example, one could evaluate whether the Abraham Accords solidified the anti-Iran coalition or increased commercial ties between the parties. Instead, the brief is focused on claims by supporters of both the Abraham Accords and of current proposals for normalization with Saudi Arabia that such agreements promise benefits for Israeli-Palestinian rapprochement as part of a sustainable Middle East peace. These claims have been a major selling point for normalization. This paper is devoted solely to assessing these latter claims and does not analyze other potential benefits or drawbacks of normalization.

<sup>4</sup> Dana El Kurd, “Assessing the Abraham Accords, Three Years On,” August 31, 2023, <https://arabcenterdc.org/resource/assessing-the-abraham-accords-three-years-on/>.

<sup>5</sup> Linda Givetash and Lauren Egan, “Israel, Arab states sign Trump-brokered deals in White House ceremony,” NBC News, September 15, 2020, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/israel-arab-states-set-sign-trump-brokered-deals-white-house-n1240105>.

<sup>6</sup> Ariel Kahana, “Friedman on Abraham Accords: ‘When the dust settles, Israeli-Arab conflict will be over’,” September 17, 2020, <https://www.jns.org/friedman-on-the-abraham-accords-when-the-dust-settles-the-israeli-arab-conflict-will-be-over/>.

If the general claim was that regional peace would follow from the Abraham Accords, proponents also expected the accords to (1) stop Israeli annexation of some or all of the West Bank, and (2) bring about an Israeli-Palestinian rapprochement.

In terms of stopping annexation, at the signing ceremony, UAE Foreign Minister bin Zayed directed his words to Netanyahu and said, “Thank you for halting the annexation of Palestinian territories.” Then, speaking to the Palestinian people, he explained that the Abraham Accords would enable the Palestinian people to “realize their hopes for an independent state within a stable and prosperous region.” Bahrain’s Foreign Minister al Zayani said the two-state solution would be a “bedrock” of a lasting peace.

As part of the agreement, Israel agreed not to annex the West Bank. Some reports suggested that the Israeli promise was time-limited, that Israel had only agreed not to annex the West Bank for a certain number of years, perhaps four. At that time, Friedman called it a “temporary suspension” of Israel’s annexation policy.<sup>7</sup>

What about an Israeli-Palestinian rapprochement? How would the accords, a regional agreement that did not involve Palestinian leaders or negotiators, lead to such a transformed Israeli-Palestinian relationship? At the time of the agreement, officials and analysts characterized several pathways. As we will see in a later section, the evidence from 2021, and especially from 2023 to 2024, demonstrates that none of these mechanisms have worked thus far.

Trump told Fox and Friends that the Abraham Accords was part of a U.S. effort to pressure the Palestinians into negotiating a peace deal.<sup>8</sup> Others framed the agreement in softer terms as giving the Arab parties the opportunity to persuade Israel. One suggestion was for the United States to join the Gulf Arab states “in persuading Israel, and the Palestinians, to work towards a deal which might actually work.” The thinking

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<sup>7</sup> Kahana, “Friedman on Abraham Accords: ‘When the dust settles, Israeli-Arab conflict will be over.’” September 17, 2020.

<sup>8</sup> Quint Forgey, “The dawn of a new Middle East’: Trump celebrates Abraham Accords with White House signing ceremony,” *Politico*, September 15, 2024, <https://www.politico.com/news/2020/09/15/trump-abraham-accords-palestinians-peace-deal-415083>.

was that they now had leverage over Israel.<sup>9</sup> “We will be able to stand inside the tent of the Palestine issue and put pressure in favour of Palestinians,” said Omar Ghobash, the UAE Assistant Minister for Cultural Affairs and Public Diplomacy.<sup>10</sup>

Meanwhile, Jared Kushner, a Trump family member and advisor, took a different tack, suggesting the Abraham Accords were an effort to bypass the Palestinians, asserting that later, the Palestinians would realize their mistake and eventually join: “With regard to the Palestinians, I think that with time that will come.” The United States “can’t want peace more than other people want peace,” he added. Michael Doran, too, wrote that the agreement meant bypassing the Palestinian question, with little impact for doing so: “The Palestinian-Israeli conflict seems likely in time to become … an insoluble but localized dilemma with a specific set of local human costs.”<sup>11</sup> The Palestinian Authority, according to Salman Al-Dossary, the former editor-in-chief of *Asharq Al-Awsat* newspaper, “has no option but to accept the regional realities surrounding it.”<sup>12</sup> It didn’t matter what the Palestinian leaders thought of the agreement. Perhaps those Palestinian leaders would realize that and eventually play by the rules established by the Abraham Accords. Asked what message he had for the Palestinians, UN Secretary-General António Guterres answered, “it’s important to seize the opportunities that exist.”<sup>13</sup> Efraim Inbar, president of the Jerusalem Institute for Strategy and Security, said, “In my opinion, [the Palestinians] have to calibrate their expectations of what can be achieved.”<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Sam Kiley, “Middle East agreements brokered by Trump present opportunity for Biden if he wins election,” *CNN*, September 21, 2020, <https://www.cnn.com/2020/09/21/politics/trump-biden-middle-east-analysis-intl/index.html>.

<sup>10</sup> Editorial, “Abraham Accord: A path to regional peace and prosperity,” *The National*, September 17, 2020, <https://www.thenationalnews.com/opinion/editorial/abraham-accord-a-path-to-regional-peace-and-prosperity-1.1078234>.

<sup>11</sup> Michael Doran, “The Emperor’s New Clothes,” *Tablet*, September 22, 2020, <https://www.tabletmag.com/sections/israel-middle-east/articles/abraham-accords-trump>.

<sup>12</sup> Salman Al-Dossary, “Ties with Israel … Bahrain Knows What’s Best for Itself,” *Asharq Al-Awsat*, September 13, 2020, <https://english.aawsat.com/home/article/2505281/salman-al-dossary/ties-israelbahrain-knows-whats-best-itself>.

<sup>13</sup> “Abraham Accord, Quartet – Press Conference by Secretary-General António Guterres at UN Headquarters (SG/SM/20258) (Excerpts),” September 16, 2020, <https://www.un.org/unispal/document/abraham-accord-quartet-press-conference-by-secretary-general-antonio-guterres-at-un-headquarters-sg-sm-20258-excerpts/>.

<sup>14</sup> Adela Suliman, “Progress, not peace: Breaking down the Trump-brokered deals between Israel, Arab states,” *NBC News*, September 18, 2020, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/progress-not-peace-breaking-down-trump-brokered-deals-between-israel-n1240298>.

## *The accords bypassed the Palestinian dimension, with Palestinians facing a choice: get on board or get left behind.*

But what if Palestinians did not adjust to this supposed new reality? If the Palestinians did not get on board, wrote Al-Dossary, “they risk being disregarded.”<sup>15</sup> According to *al-Jazeera*, “Trump predicted the Palestinians would eventually join as well or else be ‘left out in the cold’.”<sup>16</sup> Fawaz Gerges, a professor at the London School of Economics, characterized the implications of who signed the accords and how they were worded: “The Palestinian cause is a minor issue, a distraction, in the normalization agreements signed between Israel and the Gulf states.”<sup>17</sup> To put it another way, the accords bypassed the Palestinian dimension, with Palestinians facing a choice: get on board or get left behind.

Others suggested the Abraham Accords would lead to greater flexibility in Israel’s position. Khalaf Ahmad Al-Habtoor, a UAE businessman, wrote that before the agreement, with nothing to lose, Israel could afford to take a hard-line.<sup>18</sup> But, “the more Israel is connected with its Arab neighbors on multiple levels, the more it will be open to making compromises.”<sup>19</sup>

What almost all of these approaches share is the idea that the Abraham Accords were a pathway toward improved Palestinian-Israeli relations.

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<sup>15</sup> Salman Al-Dossary, “Ties with Israel ... Bahrain Knows What’s Best for Itself,” *Ashraq Al-Awsat*, September 13, 2020, <https://english.aawsat.com/home/article/2505281/salman-al-dossary/ties-israelbahrain-knows-whats-best-itself>.

<sup>16</sup> “Israel, UAE and Bahrain sign US-brokered normalisation deals,” *Al Jazeera*, September 15, 2020, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/9/15/israel-uae-and-bahrain-sign-us-brokered-normalisation-deals>.

<sup>17</sup> Sam Kiley, “Middle East agreements brokered by Trump present opportunity for Biden if he wins election,” CNN, September 21, 2020, <https://www.cnn.com/2020/09/21/politics/trump-biden-middle-east-analysis-intl/index.html>.

<sup>18</sup> UAE businessman Khalaf Ahmad Al-Habtoor noted that, “Given Israel’s substantial strategic benefits both from peace treaties with Egypt and Jordan and Israel’s alliance with the United States, I do not accept the claim it had nothing to lose before the Accords.”

<sup>19</sup> Khalaf Ahmad Al-Habtoor, “‘Circle of peace’ can heal our troubled region,” *Arab News*, September 17, 2020, <https://arab.news/7nxw2>.

## The U.S. approach to peace

Over the decades, the U.S. peace process has been based on two approaches. One is based on direct negotiations between the parties and the other is based on various regional efforts. The Abraham Accords was in the regional category, relying on the idea that regional activity would eventually improve Israeli-Palestinian ties, rather than the reverse.

Most of the time, the U.S. government has facilitated direct negotiations between the frontline actors, meaning Egypt and Israel, Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization, Israel and Syria, and Israel and Lebanon.<sup>20</sup> The assumption was that Middle East peace depended on bilateral resolutions. Peace had to start with the warring parties.

That did not mean the regional element was wholly absent. In 2002, led by Saudi Arabia, the League of Arab States put forward a comprehensive peace plan based on Arab acceptance of a two-state solution. But the sequencing was clear. In return for, among other things, Israel's "[c]omplete withdrawal from the occupied Arab territories – including the Golan Heights in Syria, the June 4, 1967 line, and the territories still occupied in southern Lebanon," the Arab states would then "[e]stablish normal relations with Israel." Israeli withdrawal would open the door to regional normalization. If there were a regional plan, the immediate past Palestinian Prime Minister Mohammed Shtayyeh (2019-2024) would favor this one, according to a recent article he authored in *Foreign Affairs*.<sup>21</sup>

The negotiation and signing of the Abraham Accords in 2020, however, offered a different type of regional approach. The accords still involved Israel, but now the frontline Arab states had been replaced by distant Arab states with little involvement in

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<sup>20</sup> Two caveats. First, in the early years of the peace process, the U.S. government did not see the Palestinian dimension as requiring direct negotiations. Second, the United States has also been involved on the Israel-Jordan track, though that has often proceeded based on direct Israeli-Jordanian initiatives.

<sup>21</sup> Mohammed Shtayyeh, "The Best Way to End Israel's War in Gaza," *Foreign Affairs*, July 4, 2024, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/israel/best-way-end-israels-war-gaza>.

past wars: Bahrain, Morocco, Sudan, and the UAE. The accords established normal diplomatic relations between these states and Israel, leapfrogging over the unresolved Israeli-Palestinian, Israeli-Lebanese, and Israeli-Syrian tracks. As noted already, the claims were that the new accords would shift the regional dynamic and the frontline actors, including the Palestinian national movement, would either get on board or be left behind. At best, the accords would spur recalcitrant Arab parties to settle their remaining differences with Israel. Proponents felt regional normalization would open the door to the end of the conflict, an outside-in approach.

Whereas the first approach required major concessions from Israel, the second one might not. If coupled with the Trump administration's Israeli-Palestinian plan of 2020, the concessions would fall almost exclusively on the Palestinian side. Israel could have its cake and eat it, too: growing integration with the broader Middle East, Palestinian concessions, continued Israeli rule and settlement of much of the West Bank, and close support from the United States.

So, given this alternate approach, how have the accords fared? From the vantage point of 2024, almost four years later, did this model and its possible pathways to a better region work to resolve – even partially – the Israeli-Palestinian conflict?

## **Rapprochement no, war yes**

On the questions of the dawn of a new era of peace and Palestinian-Israeli rapprochement, the exact opposite has occurred. The state of Palestinian-Israeli relations is as bad as ever, with a major crisis and confrontation in April-May 2021 and full-on warfare from 2023 to 2024. As of mid-2023, it was already hard to imagine how the parties would arrive at some type of permanent resolution. Now they struggle even to reach a ceasefire, let alone a stable, long-term political outcome with dignity and security for all. The claim is not that the Abraham Accords caused this utter devastation, including the Hamas attack on October 7, 2023, and Israel's mass killing of tens of thousands of Palestinians in Gaza. However, the accords have certainly not

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In the interest of brevity, I will not reprise the Israeli-Palestinian fighting in April and May 2021. It caused many casualties and joined the list of recent Israeli-Palestinian battles over Gaza (e.g., 2008-09, 2012, 2014). As always, Israel's tremendous advantage in military power and technology translated into a much higher death toll and wounded numbers on the Palestinian side. Israeli forces killed approximately 232 Palestinians in Gaza during its military operation, while Palestinian forces killed approximately 14 Israelis and foreign nationals.<sup>22</sup>

On October 7, 2023, Hamas forces invaded Israel. Hamas and others killed approximately 1200 Israelis and others and took more than 240 people hostage. Most of the dead were civilians, but the toll also included active-duty Israeli soldiers and police officers.

Since that day, the Israeli military has destroyed Gaza, killing approximately 37,000 people. Almost the entire Palestinian population of 2.2 million has been displaced from their homes, most multiple times. Starvation is widespread largely due to Israel's attacks and its repeatedly limiting the entry of humanitarian convoys into Gaza. Israeli attacks have greatly harmed the transport, sanitation, sewage, medical, and food distribution systems that are necessary for health and daily sustenance. According to Arwa Damon, a former war correspondent for CNN, "The level of destruction in such a

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<sup>22</sup> See "Fatalities," The Israeli Information Center for Human Rights in the Occupied Territories, January 24, 2022, [https://www.btselem.org/press\\_releases/20220104\\_in\\_deadliest\\_year\\_since\\_2014\\_israel\\_killed\\_319\\_palestinians\\_in\\_opt](https://www.btselem.org/press_releases/20220104_in_deadliest_year_since_2014_israel_killed_319_palestinians_in_opt).

short period in Gaza, and the psychological devastation suffered by the population, cannot be compared to any other place.”<sup>23</sup>

The regional implications, too, have been severe and destabilizing. Hizballah (Lebanon) and Israel are engaged in low-level warfare. Iran, pro-Iranian Iraqi militias, and Houthi forces from Yemen have engaged militarily with Israel and its allies, such as the United States. More broadly, the news is problematic for the United States. “The State Department’s top intelligence official is warning that the war in Gaza is bolstering recruitment among terrorist organizations and providing “inspiration for lone actors’ furious over the United States’ staunch support for Israel.”<sup>24</sup> In other words, fighting in Gaza and southern Israel sparked an escalation in regional instability.

As one would expect, relations between Hamas and the Israeli government are poor. One of Israel’s stated war goals is to destroy Hamas. But relations between Israel and the Palestinian Authority (PA), the only one of the three political actors strongly in favor of two states, are also fraught. The PA’s main territorial base is in the West Bank, but Israeli governmental and settler action does much to undermine any semblance of PA governance. The PA looks helpless in the face of Israeli violence and expulsions of Palestinians in the West Bank.<sup>25</sup> In addition, for months, the Netanyahu government ruled out turning over Gaza to the PA as a way to prevent Hamas rule after the end of the fighting, whenever that day might come. It is another Israeli policy meant to constrain the PA and prevent its reemergence as an actor with significant authority in

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<sup>23</sup> Shany Littman, “As a CNN War Reporter, Arwa Damon Thought She Had Seen Everything. Then She Went to Gaza,” *Ha’aretz*, June 21, 2024, <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/2024-06-21/ty-article-magazine/.highlight/as-a-cnn-war-reporter-arwa-damon-thought-she-had-seen-everything-then-she-went-to-gaza/00000190-3bdd-d768-adf8-3fff8a400000>.

<sup>24</sup> John Hudson, “Gaza war a recruiting boon for terrorists, U.S. intelligence shows,” *Washington Post*, July 5, 2024, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/2024/07/05/gaza-terrorism-israel-us-intelligence/>.

<sup>25</sup> Bethan McKernan and Quique Kierszenbaum, “Israel destroys 11 homes in West Bank village amid spiralling violence,” *The Guardian*, June 28, 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/article/2024/jun/28/israel-destroys-11-homes-in-west-bank-village-amid-spiralling-violence>; Yaniv Kubovich, “Israeli Military Commander in West Bank Slams Settler Leadership Over Violence Against Palestinians,” *Ha’aretz*, July 9, 2024, <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/2024-07-09/ty-article/.premium/idf-commander-in-west-bank-slams-settler-leadership-over-violence-against-palestinians/00000190-93fa-d8d3-adb9-dbfeb7490000>; and Al-Haq, “Israeli Occupying Forces and Settlers Continue to Commit Crimes in the West Bank; the International Justice System is at Stake,” December 21, 2023, <https://www.alhaq.org/advocacy/22376.html>.

Gaza and the West Bank. The PA itself is a troubled entity, and nothing in the last few months has suggested that will change.

In short, the Abraham Accords did not lead to a new era or an Israeli-Palestinian rapprochement.

## Annexation happened anyway

The premise that the Abraham Accords would delay, if not block, Israeli annexation proved incorrect. Some scholars already argue that Israel's annexation of the West Bank has occurred; it is no longer a future fear or prospect.<sup>26</sup> While the Israeli government never made a grand announcement like "we annexed the West Bank," it does not mean it has abstained from annexation. Even when the accords were signed in 2020, Dana El Kurd said, "Annexation and the theft of Palestinian land continues unabated, as it did before the Israeli government pointed to a date in the calendar as 'annexation' day and will continue to do so after."<sup>27</sup>

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The current Netanyahu government, which took office in December 2022, has taken multiple steps to cement annexation. Building on Israel's 2018 nation-state law, it declared exclusive Jewish sovereignty from the river to the sea in government

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<sup>26</sup> Tamar Megiddo, Ronit Levine-Schnur, and Yael Berda, "Israel is Annexing the West Bank. Don't be Misled by its Gaslighting," February 9, 2023, <https://www.justsecurity.org/85093/israel-is-annexing-the-west-bank-dont-be-misled-by-its-gaslighting/>; and Dahlia Scheindlin and Yael Berda, "Israel's Annexation of the West Bank Has Already Begun," *Foreign Affairs*, June 9, 2023, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/israel/israels-annexation-west-bank-has-already-begun>.

<sup>27</sup> Patsy Widakuswara, "Trump Hosts Abraham Accords Signing Between Israel, UAE and Bahrain," *Voice of America*, September 15, 2020, [https://www.voanews.com/a/middle-east\\_trump-hosts-abraham-accords-signing-between-israel-uae-and-bahrain/6195897.html](https://www.voanews.com/a/middle-east_trump-hosts-abraham-accords-signing-between-israel-uae-and-bahrain/6195897.html).

guidelines released in late 2022.<sup>28</sup> There is nothing in these guidelines that implies temporary occupation.

More importantly, though, Israeli Minister of Finance Bezalel Smotrich has moved Israeli rule of the West Bank from military authorities to civilian oversight, saying, “We created a separate civilian system.”<sup>29</sup> Extending civilian oversight over occupied territory is annexation. Although Smotrich is Minister of Finance, he also negotiated responsibility over West Bank Affairs within the Ministry of Defense although he is not its minister. For example, on May 29, 2024, the Israeli Defense Forces posted notice of an order that “transfers responsibility for dozens of bylaws at the Civil Administration -- the Israeli body governing in the West Bank – from the military to officials led by Smotrich at the defence ministry.” Mairav Zonszein of the International Crisis Group was succinct in her appraisal of the current situation: “The big story is that this is no longer ‘creeping annexation’ or ‘de facto annexation,’ it is actual annexation.”<sup>30</sup>

On July 3, 2024, the Israeli government made public the largest expropriation of West Bank land since the 1990s, almost five square miles.<sup>31</sup> Also, in early July, a majority of members of parliament called for a declaration stating the Knesset “categorically opposes founding a Palestinian state west of the Jordan (River).”<sup>32</sup> These are two examples that demonstrate Israel’s settlements in the occupied territories are continuing apace. This whole time since 2020, Israel, whether through the government or individual settler actions, has been building and expanding settlements, expropriating

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<sup>28</sup> Carrie Keller-Lynn and Michael Bachner, “Judicial reform, boosting Jewish identity: The new coalition’s policy guidelines,” *Times of Israel*, December 28, 2022,

<https://www.timesofisrael.com/judicial-reform-boosting-jewish-identity-the-new-coalitions-policy-guidelines/>.

<sup>29</sup> Natan Odenheimer, Ronen Bergman, and Patrick Kingsley, “Israeli Official Describes Secret Government Bid to Cement Control of West Bank,” *The New York Times*, June 21, 2024,

<https://www.nytimes.com/2024/06/21/world/middleeast/israel-west-bank-netanyahu-bezalel-smotrich.html>.

<sup>30</sup> Peter Beaumont, “IDF transfers powers in occupied West Bank to pro-settler civil servants,” *The Guardian*, June 20, 2024,

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/article/2024/jun/20/idf-transfers-powers-in-occupied-west-bank-to-pro-settler-civil-servants>.

<sup>31</sup> Peace Now, “The Government Declares 12,000 Dunams in the Jordan Valley as State Lands,” July 3, 2024, <https://peacenow.org.il/en/state-land-declaration-12000-dunams>.

<sup>32</sup> Eliav Breuer, “No Palestinian state west of the Jordan River; 63 Knesset members say,” *Jerusalem Post*, July 4, 2024, <https://www.ipost.com/israel-news/article-808926>.

land, and violently attacking the Palestinian population. This has further formalized the on-the-ground reality of Israeli domination and control.

In short, whether the 2020 Israeli government ever planned to concede annexation as part of the Abraham Accords is largely irrelevant. In practice, the Israeli government did not do so. It has done the opposite by tightening its hold on the West Bank.

## **Why didn't the regional approach work as a tool for conflict resolution?**

While we may not yet have a definitive answer to this question, there are a number of reasonable explanations why the Abraham Accords did not lead to peace and stability. The accords did not address the root of the Israeli-Palestinian problem. The Palestinians did not capitulate in the face of a diplomatic setback. Above all else, the government of Israel seeks expansion through settlements. The Netanyahu government was not persuaded to change its core policy beliefs.

- 1) The Abraham Accords did not address the root of the problem. In fact, the accords intentionally bypassed the root of the problem, Israel-Palestine, with the thought that sidestepping it would lead to transformation or minimization. In contrast, consider the UN summary of the Indonesia representative to a UN Security Council discussion of the accords: "Indonesia's representative, however, pointed out that the root cause of the Palestinian–Israeli conflict is the illegal occupation, amplified by decades of creeping annexation and illegal settlement policy in flagrant violation of international law and resolution 2334 (2016). "Peace without addressing the root causes is not peace at all," he emphasized."<sup>33</sup> Or, consider the comments by Ahmad Majdalani, executive committee member of the Palestine Liberation Organization: "This illusion that Netanyahu has about

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<sup>33</sup> "Normalization of Ties between Israel, Gulf Arab States Presents Opportunity for Re-engagement in Talks, Special Coordinator Tells Security Council," SC/14315, September 29, 2020, <https://press.un.org/en/2020/sc14315.doc.htm>.

making peace with the Arabs without making peace with the Palestinians or withdrawing from the occupied territories is just that – an illusion.”<sup>34</sup>

- 2) The Palestinians did not capitulate in the face of a diplomatic setback. Though excluded from the Abraham Accords negotiations, the Palestinian national movement did not give up its goals of independence and security. Nationalist movements do not tend to fold up shop in the face of diplomatic adversity, and the Palestinian one has not proven any different.<sup>35</sup>
- 3) The government of Israel seeks expansion. Focusing solely on the current Israeli government, it has clearly favored settlements, annexation, land expropriation, and the heavy application of military force. It has no time for concessions toward the Palestinians, regardless of its new Abraham Accords partners’ desire for Israeli concessions to the Palestinians – a genuine move toward two states – being part of the process.
- 4) Israel was not persuaded to change its core policy beliefs. Since the signing of the accords, Israel has continued on its rightward path. Israeli society has largely stuck with pro-occupation, right-wing governments – now including open Kahanists (militant, far-right politicians like Minister of National Security Itamar Ben-Gvir). Netanyahu openly rejects Palestinian sovereignty in the West Bank, a foundational piece of a two-state solution, and his current government has agreed the Jewish claim to sovereignty is exclusive.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Adela Suliman, “Progress, not peace: Breaking down the Trump-brokered deals between Israel, Arab states,” *NBC News*, September 18, 2020, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/progress-not-peace-breaking-down-trump-brokered-deals-between-israel-n1240298>.

<sup>35</sup> Evan Perkoski and Jeremy Pressman, “Israel, Palestine, and the Perpetual Denial of Nationalist Claims,” *Political Violence at a Glance*, October 10, 2019, <https://politicalviolenceataglance.org/2019/10/10/israel-palestine-and-the-perpetual-denial-of-nationalist-claims/>.

<sup>36</sup> “Israeli PM tells U.S. he opposes a two-state solution in postwar Gaza,” *CBC*, January 18, 2024, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/world/israel-palestinians-netanyahu-two-state-solution-1.7087705>; and David Horovitz, “Netanyahu finally speaks his mind,” *Times of Israel*, July 13, 2014, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/netanyahu-finally-speaks-his-mind/>.

# Conclusion

## U.S.-Israel-Saudi today

Given that the Abraham Accords have not advanced Israeli-Palestinian relations toward peace and stability, what are the implications for the prospects of a trilateral U.S.-Israeli-Saudi normalization agreement? Several potential implications suggest the problematic and likely negative impact of Saudi normalization on Israeli-Palestinian conflict resolution. Saudi Arabia and the United States would forfeit potential leverage to influence Israeli policy. This type of regional approach diverts attention to another issue away from the core of the Arab-Israeli conflict, Israel-Palestine. Lastly, this regional approach embraces a model for Arab-Israeli and Israeli-Palestinian stability that is unsupported by historical evidence.

As part of an Israeli-Saudi normalization plan, any Israeli commitments are likely to be mere window-dressing rather than genuine concessions. The government of Israel is on record that only the Jewish claim to the Holy Land is valid. Netanyahu openly rejects Palestinian sovereignty in the West Bank, thereby precluding a two-state solution. The Netanyahu government might agree to some ambiguous diplomatic phrasings but it would not make any substantive move toward the recognition and realization of Palestinian statehood in the West Bank and Gaza. It would not recognize the Palestinian right to national self-determination. It would not withdraw a large number of Israeli settlers from the West Bank. It will not declare Jerusalem the capital of both Israel and Palestine and share governance of and sovereignty in the city. In short, it is unlikely that a Biden-orchestrated deal would involve Israel committing to major concessions on Palestine; it would not do the minimum necessary to jumpstart a genuine move toward an Israeli-Palestinian resolution. Given that, what are the implications?

First, unlike the Saudi Initiative of 2002, which came to be known as the Arab Peace Initiative, today's approach forfeits leverage (Saudi normalization) that could be used to

press Israel to make important concessions vis-a-vis Palestine. In the older plan, Saudi normalization was leveraged because it would transpire after the Israeli-Palestinian talks had been resolved and concessions were determined for both parties. Now, the Biden approach is to push Saudi normalization paired with Israel doing something on the Palestinian track. If Israel does not commit to much substance, then Saudi Arabia, with U.S. government help, would have played its biggest card -- normalization -- without getting much on Palestine. That is not a problem for the Saudi government since it aims to advance Saudi interests, not Palestinian ones. At the same time, Israeli-Saudi normalization would do little to advance Israeli-Palestinian conflict resolution.

Should the Saudi government trade normalization for Israeli window-dressing on Palestinian matters, it would be yet another example of the United States forfeiting the leverage it or its allies have regarding Israel. For example, much has been written about Biden's difficulties with the Israeli government's conduct of the war in Gaza. But Washington has not pressured Israel by making U.S. aid conditional, regularly allowing UN Security Council resolutions to pass, or invoking existing U.S. law, such as the Leahy law, that would hold the Israeli military to account for human rights violations.<sup>37</sup> If the Israeli government does as it pleases without repercussions involving its biggest ally, then why would it change its policies absent pressure?<sup>38</sup>

Second, the regional approach diverts attention from the core of the Arab-Israeli conflict, Israel-Palestine. To put it another way, it would give a diplomatic victory to the very political forces in Israel that want to forever suppress Palestinian nationalism. To them, a diplomatic achievement like this might well confirm Israel is on the correct and best path. That view would be reinforced by Israeli integration into the region, the opposite of isolation.

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<sup>37</sup> On the Biden administration's avoidance of the Leahy Law, see Charles O. (Cob) Blaha, "Israel and the Leahy Law," June 10, 2024, <https://www.justsecurity.org/96522/israel-leahy-law/>.

<sup>38</sup> The Biden administration delayed one arms shipment, but that is a small move compared to what it could have done. Over 100 other arms shipments occurred.

Moreover, it is based on the logic that Israel-Palestine will fade away as an issue or easily transform as a result of regional efforts. Neither assumption proved true with the Abraham Accords. The current situation in which millions of Palestinians are displaced and starving in Gaza, hundreds of thousands of Israelis are displaced, and the hostages have not been released needs direct attention. In part, we are seeing the results of leaving such issues unresolved.

Third, the regional approach embraces a model for Arab-Israeli/Israeli-Palestinian stability that has no supporting evidence: the outside-in regional model. If anything, the last few years show what can happen when leaders fail to grapple with the core Israel-Palestine issue. Neither of the Arab-Israeli peace treaties with core or frontline Arab participants (Egypt in 1979; Jordan in 1994) occurred through this type of regional approach.

To be fair, the Oslo process and subsequent efforts at direct mediation did not end the conflict. But the outside-in regional model lacks mechanisms to improve the situation. Thus far, the positive impact of the Abraham Accords --- an outside-in regional model --- on Israeli-Palestinian conflict resolution is negligible. In pushing for a trilateral U.S.-Israeli-Saudi normalization agreement, the Biden administration would waste diplomatic leverage, divert attention from the issue that most needs resolution (the Israeli-Palestinian dimension), and back a model of conflict resolution that lacks historical support.

Washington is not helpless in the face of the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian war. Biden's ceasefire proposal was a step in the right direction. Ending the war, flooding Gaza with humanitarian aid, and releasing hostages are crucial first steps. U.S. officials also need to play hardball with Netanyahu, using U.S. leverage to prod Israel toward acceptance of the core reality: two peoples, Israelis and Palestinians, have internationally recognized claims to the same land. Any stable, long-term solution that will reduce death and

suffering requires dignity and security for both peoples. Without acceptance of this core reality, death and destruction will only continue.

Meanwhile, U.S. diplomats should redefine the push toward Israeli-Saudi normalization. The government of Israel needs to know that genuine, substantive steps toward dignity and security for Palestinians and Israelis are a prerequisite for Israeli-Saudi normalization. A process in which Israeli concessions consist at most of diplomatic boilerplate that does not lead to substantive change on the ground simply cements a destabilizing status quo where Palestinian aspirations are wholly disregarded and all lives — Palestinian and Israeli — are in danger.

## About the Author

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