



**THE BEGIN-SADAT CENTER
FOR STRATEGIC STUDIES**



Bar-Ilan
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The Abraham Accords: Contrasting Reflections

Shmuel Trigano



Mideast Security and Policy Studies No. 188

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Cover image: Israeli PM Benjamin Netanyahu, US President Donald Trump, Bahrain FM Abdullatif bin Rashid Al Zayani, and UAE FM Abdullah bin Zayed Al Nahyan at the signing ceremony of the Abraham Accords on the South Lawn of the White House, Washington, DC, September 15, 2020; image via Wikimedia Commons

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The Abraham Accords: Contrasting Reflections

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

It may be time to take a step back to consider the implications of the new state of affairs ushered in by the Abraham Accords, which changed Israel's strategic landscape. The Trump era has passed, and subsequent developments encourage such reflection. Bahrain rejected a visit from Israeli PM Benjamin Netanyahu unless he also visited the UAE on the same trip. Saudi Arabia's King Salman continues to refuse to recognize Israel on the grounds that the Palestinian question must be resolved first. The next in line to the Saudi throne, Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman, prefers to wait to assess the approach taken by the new US administration—and he is, in any case, well aware that only 30% of the Saudi population responds positively to the notion of commercial exchanges with Israel. These regional states do not necessarily want to reverse the process that has been set in motion, but might prefer to take matters more slowly.

From Israel's point of view, one must salute the masterful tactical coup that made the Accords possible. They took the Palestinians, with their decades-long hostage-taking of the Arab world, as well as the EU and its mantra of menaces to the two-state solution, out of the game. The Israeli left, which remains prisoner to the Oslo process despite its failure, is now relegated to the margins.

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Still, the success of the Accords will ultimately depend on the signature of Saudi Arabia. The participation of Bahrain and the UAE were trial balloons sent up by Riyadh. Those states would never have undertaken anything with Israel without the kingdom's tacit agreement.

With that said, it must be acknowledged that the obtaining of the benevolence of Riyadh, guardian of Islam's sacred sites, is itself a major development. Even now, ahead of a prospective signature by the Saudis, the Accords represent an important strategic development on the regional level: Israel now has local military allies in the face of Iranian imperialism, holy war, and threats of extermination.

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THE END OF A STRATEGIC CONFIGURATION

The existence of the Abraham Accords is part of the end of the Soviet era and the confrontation between the free world and the communist world. The Arab world was one of the most important levers of the anti-Western struggle, engineered by the Soviets under the mask of “anti-colonialism.” Under the leadership of the USSR, the Arab countries created in the aftermath of decolonization solidified into a single bloc unified by their hatred of Israel and Zionism.

The key to this configuration was identification with the Palestinian cause, constructed full-cloth as a “national cause” in the struggle against colonialism and not as the holy war it in fact was. Gen. Ian Pacépa, who was Head of Romania’s External Intelligence Service under Ceausescu and who defected to the West, revealed that it was during a congress in Romania in 1964, under the aegis of the KGB, that the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) was formed. The congress made a critical strategic decision: to reconfigure the Palestinian cause as a “national” cause to seduce the European Left of the free world, which at the time was in thrall to third-worldism and anti-colonialism. The Palestinians became the “chosen people” of the Left under Soviet influence, incarnating what the global proletariat once represented. Today it is Islamo-leftism that has inherited this fabrication.

The fall of the Soviet bloc provoked the collapse of the house of cards of the post-colonial Arab states, and this strategy went down along with them. The so-called “Arab Spring” of the 2010s represented a regression in that it heralded a return to political Islam and the Muslim Brotherhood, which had prevailed during the pre-national period (when the *umma* was not understood as a nation but as the Islamic community).

It is in relation to this background that the disappearance of the Palestinian factor in the new configuration must be understood. It is not necessarily the result of a deliberate policy, but the effect of the establishment of a new strategic landscape. It is remarkable in this regard that the EU is today the only power that has continued in a quasi-religious manner to support the Palestinian cause.

This confirms the argument of Soviet dissident Vladimir Boukovski. After gaining his freedom, he went to Europe during the time of its unification and discovered that the EU, which was coming into being before his eyes, bore many similarities to what had been the USSR—not only on the level of the nature of power and of policies, but also ideology. He invented the acronym EUSSR for his book, *EUSSR: The Soviet Roots of European Integration* (2004).

THE WEAKNESSES OF THE ACCORDS

All this being said, one should not ignore the weaknesses of the Accords, which—in certain uncontrollable and entirely plausible circumstances—risk falling into profound crisis. The Arab states concerned are rich, but they are also weak: they have no strategic depth, and their populations are largely foreign. In the UAE, the population consists of 85% non-citizen foreigners, and in Bahrain, 54% are predominantly Shiite non-citizen foreigners who are backed by Iran and hostile to the Accords with Israel.

No one knows what the future holds for these states. Palace revolution? Invasion? Rebellion by the local foreigners? Iran would eat them up. And should we also consider the possibility of reversal? The culture of *taqiya* (the theological right of a Muslim power to renege on a treaty it signed during a moment of weakness) is an abiding cultural dimension that must be taken into consideration in any realistic strategy.

There are also weaknesses on the Israeli side. The gigantic divide between the immense diplomatic success of Benjamin Netanyahu and the witch hunt to which he is being subjected in his own country poses a serious question about the Israelis' capacity to take stock of reality and the hierarchies at play. This is because the anti-Netanyahu fervor in Israel objectively undermines the credibility of the Accords in the eyes of Israel's Arab partners.

The behavior of the “black flag” leftist protesters on this matter goes over the line. The project of undermining the chief negotiator of the Accords weakens the country considerably in the international arena in front of both its enemies and its Western “friends,” who are resigned to their own civilizational decline and who can’t stop dragging Israel down along with them. The end of the Trump presidency plays into this fate, because the unfolding return to the policies of the Obama era promises catastrophe in the Middle East.

We should not, however, neglect the fact that Trump’s historic coup was achieved by attaching the Accords to the sale of aircraft for considerable sums to the countries involved (now including Morocco) as well as to Saudi Arabia. Business was not absent from his operation. This suggests that had Trump remained in power, a crisis might have developed with his Israeli partner on political choices to be made in the West Bank, hints of which were visible during the period of negotiation.

And indeed, Jerusalem’s principal failure concerns the sale of these stealth planes, which menace Israel’s capacity to face a surprise war in which it will have lost air superiority (its only means of compensating for its weak strategic depth), or in which a third party (quite possibly Iran) will have captured these aircraft. The public debate has not told us whether Netanyahu accepted this transaction as the price of Israel’s recognition. If he did, it could turn out to have been a fool’s bargain.

The price to be paid could be heavy. A freeze on all decisions concerning the territories of the West Bank, presented by Netanyahu before the elections as “annexation,” puts a black cloud over the future of the 500,000 Jews living in those territories and implies the hypothetical construction of a Palestinian state. On this point, it was disappointing to hear the PM announce the coming extension of Israeli law in an almost obsessive way, fail to implement it, and then cease entirely to discuss it. Why announce it if there was no intention of putting it in place? All he achieved was to unite the world in opposition to Israel for no purpose.

This matter also reveals an internal weakness in Israel. Demanding sovereignty over the territories because the US had given the green light—in a way, under the American “power of attorney”—is not an expression of authentic sovereignty. True sovereignty implies strong conviction, does not need the authorization of a third party to announce itself, and affirms itself in the field. Is it true that Netanyahu has given up on any evolution of the West Bank that does not go in the direction of the PLO? If so, the Accords represent a terrible defeat—one that is laden with troubles that will manifest when it comes time to move to regulation.

THE REAL CHALLENGES

There is another dimension at play that receives little attention. Israeli television and Netanyahu himself have consistently presented a “consumerist” vision of the Accords by talking up the thousands of Israelis eager to visit Dubai, either as tourists or to do business. The Jewish expatriate community there is the subject of much reporting, and we will likely hear soon of Israelis who wish to move there. Dubai is presented, in a way, as an amusement park—a mode of characterization that diminishes the significance of the new relationship.

The Accords contain complex inherent problems that must be considered, as they can affect Israel’s strategy of national survival.

- It is not yet clear how Israel should manage, from a military and even a spiritual point of view, the fact that it is allying with Muslim Arab countries that are in a state of confrontation with other Muslim countries (notably Iran, and in a somewhat less menacing way, Turkey). This confrontation is not only political and military but also religious, in that it pits Sunnis against Shiites. Do the Accords mean Israel is now in the Sunni camp? If so, what is the impact of that development for the strategy of Jewish national existence? What does it signify in terms of Israel’s ultimate goals? What impact will it have on Jerusalem’s relationship with the EU and the US? Will Israel leave the Western camp? What impact will this have on the Sunni countries themselves regarding their relationship with passages in the Qur’an that address the status of non-Muslims?

- With Israel now at peace with these states, Jerusalem and the al-Aqsa Mosque will inevitably become sites of Muslim pilgrimage. Mecca is not far from Jerusalem (1,200 km as the crow flies; 1,500 km by road). This would be a cataclysmic development, in that it would indicate Israel's abandonment of any ambition to return to the Temple Mount. Jerusalem will become a pilgrimage destination for huge Muslim populations that wish to visit the third-holiest site in Islam following Mecca and Medina. How will the city manage this vast influx of people, the majority of whom are not "friends" of the State of Israel? Jerusalem's status as Israel's capital would be profoundly shaken. What will be the attitude of the King of Morocco, who is president of the al-Quds Committee of the Islamic Conference? The very name "al-Quds" points to the goal of a completely Muslim Jerusalem. Moreover, the charter of the Islamic Conference aspires to make Jerusalem—once it is liberated from Israeli power and even of Jews—the capital of the Islamic world. This reminds one of what an Egyptian writer of the 1970s, Muhamad Said Ahmad,* defined as the "strategy of the assimilation of the Zionist entity in the Arab-Oriental space." According to that strategy, peace with Israel would lead to Israel's end: it would be choked out of existence by the deadly grip of a peaceful Arab world.

It is also relevant that the Temple Mount is under the influence of Turkey, which invests a great deal financially as well as in terms of the sending of pilgrims and the orientation of the Mufti. Turkey has marginalized Jordan, which was "guardian of the holy Muslim places" from the period when it illegally occupied "Cisjordan." Israel wants to put Saudi Arabia on the board of administration of the Waqf, as it alone can rival Turkey in terms of money and religious influence. There is even talk that this would be the price of Saudi recognition of Israel. In that scenario, Israel would not only find itself caught up in inter-Muslim conflicts on ultimate Islamic religious authority but again would effectively renounce its right to any presence on the

* I was made acquainted with this writer's work by Mordechai Nissan.

Temple Mount. Is Israel prepared to contend with these matters? There needs to a public discussion, but as yet there is no sign that these issues are being addressed.

- The fate of the territories of the West Bank is another unknown of the Accords. If it is true that the UAE obtained assurances that a Palestinian state will be created and that there will be no Israeli annexation, what will be the consequences for Israel's strategic survival and physical continuity? At its narrowest point, Israel is only 14 km wide, which makes the creation of a third state in mandatory Palestine impossible (the first being Jordan). What will become of its link to history and Jewish identity—in other words, to the full and total assumption of its Jewish destiny and vocation in relation to its historic territories? Do the Accords require Israel to renounce its sovereign scope and be nothing more than a refuge for persecuted Jews and not the blossoming of eternal Israel? The Accords place Israel under a Sword of Damocles. It is too soon to know whether they were a benefit to Israel or a bane.

- The business potential attached to the Accords pushes aside their stakes in terms of history and identity. Reading an interview with Deputy Mayor of Jerusalem Fleur Nahum Hassan about the Accords, one is struck by the depth of their political impact. “As the deputy of Jerusalem,” Hassan said, “I see an immense potential of cooperation in the area of tourism and especially in the area of technology. Moreover, since Jerusalem counts 40% of Arabs among its population, we are striving to integrate our Arab citizens in the process of normalization. They have a key role to play as a bridge between Israel and the Gulf countries on the level of cultural and linguistic rapprochement. Because of the diverse cultural faces of our city, East Jerusalem could thus become the economic hub of the Middle East.”

This vision amounts to re-dividing Jerusalem (once again the phrase “East Jerusalem”) and to handing its Palestinian population the responsibility for Israel's relations with the UAE. This would be done without considering that that 40% of the

population of Jerusalem might see fit to attempt to take over the rest of the capital. East Jerusalem, according to this vision, would be a city in itself—and a formidable one at that, if it is indeed to become the “economic hub of the Middle East.”

This perspective highlights the fact that the new configuration will affect Israel’s Arab population. Their parties (represented until recently by the Joint Arab List in the Knesset) have all refused peace with the Emirates. They have accused the UAE of treason because they don’t recognize the legitimacy of the State of Israel on the basis of any historical line—be it 1948-9, 1967, or any other line—though they serve as members of that state’s Knesset. However, Emirati investment in the Israeli Arab sector is likely to have an effect. That flow of investment will probably result in a greater openness within this sector of the population to influences coming from the Arab world. This pattern is already visible with regard to Turkey.

There is another important development inherent to the logic of the Abraham Accords: accusations of betrayal that have come from various parts of the Muslim world with regard to the two signatory Gulf States. The recognition of Israel by Arab signatories has considerable theological implications for Islam, even if those signatories do not discuss that fact. It implies the expiration of the state of *dhimmi* to which Islam and *sharia* assign non-Muslims. This was a social exclusion that also had a political and territorial dimension to the extent that Islam is, according to its own teaching, the only legitimate power on earth.

This sense of legitimacy has a geographical and political translation that distinguishes between the “territories of the sword” (the field of jihad); the “territories of Islam,” where peace reigns under the leadership of Islam; and the “territories of (temporary) armistice,” where jihad is suspended due to an unfavorable balance of power and in the context of which Israel’s recognition should be viewed.

If the accusations of the betrayal of Islam are resisted, a true cultural and political revolution is on the horizon. Everything will depend on the signing to the Accords by Saudi Arabia, the sanctuary of Islam. This would engage religion in the political act.

The possibility of such a revolution remains highly doubtful, however. Is Islam really likely to renounce a political and territorial doctrine that is dedicated to the Islamization of the entire planet? How will the Emiratis, who are manifest representatives of Islam, get out of this?

One should note that there exists in the Qur'an itself the possibility of a second, less negative version of the Muslim relationship to the Jews, or rather to "Israel", by way of certain ambivalent verses. I follow on this topic the argument of the scholar of Islam and orientalist Eliezer Cherqui. Verse 106 of the 17th Qur'anic Surah ("The Night Journey") declares: "And We said to the Children of Israel after Pharaoh, 'Reside in the land, but when the promise of the Hereafter (the end of days) comes to pass, We will bring you all together'." Surah 5 (The Table), verse 21, says: "O my people (Israel), enter the Holy Land which God has assigned for you... O my people (Israel), enter into the Holy Land that Allah has promised you." About Judaism: "And We gave Moses the Scripture, and made it a guide for the Children of Israel: Take none for protector other than Me." Then, in Surah 2 (The Cow), verse 47: "O Children of Israel! Remember My favor which I bestowed upon you, and that I favored you over all nations."

This revision of the Muslim relationship with Israel would amount to saying that the vocation to turn all of humanity Muslim, which is part of Islamic law, stops at Israel's borders. This would be despite the fact that it is a common view in contemporary Islam to say the "Children of Israel... are not the Jews, who have become a religion shared by people of different origins who practice Judaism, a religion delegitimized on the level of the ultimate goals so that the writings in the Qur'an in favor of Israel are no longer valid for the Jews." Whatever might be the case, this doctrine concerning Israel constitutes a problem for contemporary Muslims among whom antisemitic and anti-Zionist discourse is rampant. If the Saudis come to recognize Israel, will the crown theologians cross the threshold of this theological recognition? The answer to that question remains very uncertain. No doubt it will occur "at the end of time," as the Surah says. But what will happen in the meantime?

The State of Israel has not yet begun to reflect on the strategic implications of the new landscape. While the Israeli Left persists with its black flags and its illusion of a Palestinian state, the liberal Right disregards contemporary challenges and focuses instead on dreams of tourism and finance. But there is much at stake with the Abraham Accords. They require national reflection.

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