

BACKGROUND

The Abraham Accords



Signing ceremony of the Abraham Accords at the White House on September 15, 2020, in Washington, DC. Source: Alex Wong via Getty Images.

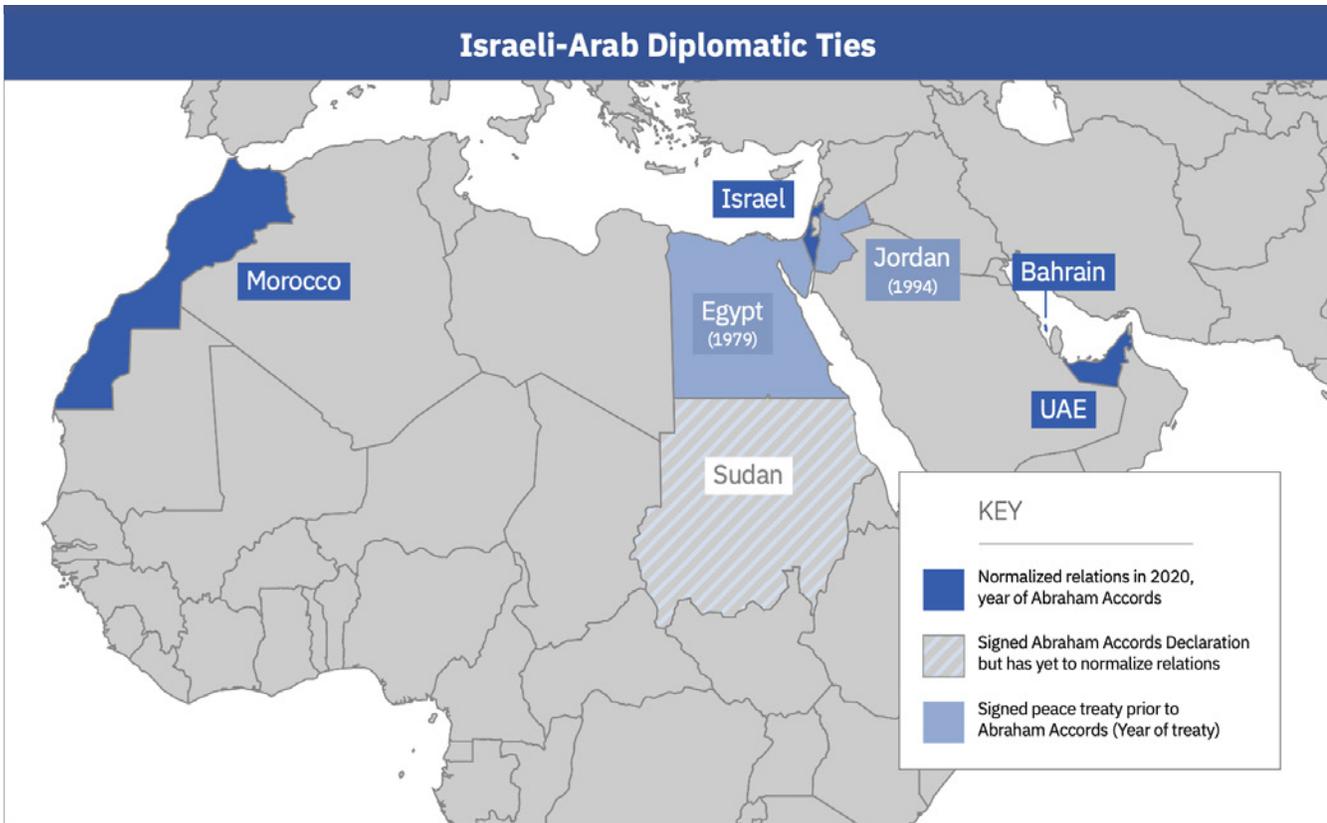
INTRODUCTION

The Abraham Accords are a series of bilateral agreements brokered by the United States whose core original intent has been to normalize relations between Israel and several Arab countries. The first agreements were signed on September 15, 2020, between Israel and the United Arab Emirates and Israel and Bahrain. Israel and Sudan [agreed](#) to normalize relations in October 2020; however, the formal signing of the documents — originally expected to take place in [Washington](#) in 2023 — was delayed due to [Sudan’s domestic turmoil](#) and the [ongoing war](#) in Gaza. In December 2020, Israel and Morocco [established](#) official diplomatic ties. Kazakhstan formally joined the grouping on November 6, 2025, although it has had normalized relations with Israel since the 1990s. The Abraham Accords represented the first formal normalization of Arab-Israeli diplomatic relations since Israel’s 1994 peace treaty with Jordan and the 1979 Egypt-Israel agreement following negotiations at Camp David. The name “[Abraham Accords](#)” was chosen to emphasize the shared Abrahamic roots of Judaism, Islam, and Christianity — the majority faiths of the original participant countries and their diplomatic convener.

The Abraham Accords built on [efforts](#) by [previous](#) US administrations to promote closer ties between Israel and other Arab states, which had been developing [under the radar](#) since the signing of the [Oslo Accords](#) in the 1990s. The accords process was part of an “outside-in” approach focused on fostering bilateral diplomatic, trade, and security relations with Arab states not directly party to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. As such, the resulting agreements did not significantly address the Palestinian issue, the resolution of which had been considered a prerequisite to formal relations with Israel. This prompted criticism that the accords undermined the 2002 Arab Peace Initiative, which sought to advance a two-state solution and ensure a just resolution for the Palestinians in exchange for Arab recognition of Israel and normalization of relations.

ARAB MOTIVES FOR NORMALIZATION WITH ISRAEL

In June 2020, following Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s pledges to [annex](#) parts of the West Bank, Emirati Ambassador to the US Yousef al-Otaiba [warned](#) that annexation would jeopardize the prospects for diplomatic relations with Arab states, including the UAE. Amb. Otaiba



Graphic produced by MEI.

[communicated](#) to the White House that the UAE would agree to normalization if Israel formally suspended its annexation plans. A deal based on this proposal was finalized during a three-way [conference call](#) between President Donald Trump, Prime Minister Netanyahu, and then-Crown Prince Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan.

Within hours of the announcement of this [agreement](#) on August 13, 2020, senior Bahraini officials [informed](#) the White House of their desire to become the next country to formalize ties with Israel. That agreement was [concluded](#) on September 11, 2020, during a call between President Trump, Prime Minister Netanyahu, and Bahraini King Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa, and [signed](#) four days later.

Morocco subsequently agreed to [normalize](#) relations with Israel in return for US recognition of its disputed [claims](#) over [Western Sahara](#). The

Trump administration pledged to open a US consulate in the Western Saharan city of Dakhla, though that initiative [stalled](#) under President Joe Biden’s administration. After this agreement was signed on December 22, 2020, Israeli-Moroccan ties [quickly developed](#). [Direct flights](#) between the two states began in July 2021, and Israeli Foreign Minister Yair Lapid [visited](#) Rabat and Casablanca a month later. The two countries also signed a [cybersecurity](#) cooperation agreement.

SUDAN: PARTIAL NORMALIZATION

On October 23, 2020, Khartoum declared its [intention](#) to normalize relations with Israel after the US agreed to remove Sudan from the US list of state sponsors of terrorism and Israel [promised](#) an aid and investment package. Sudan [signed](#) an Abraham Accords Declaration on January 6, 2021, during a visit by the US secretary of the treasury,

accompanied by an additional promise of assistance with obtaining loans from the World Bank. The move was widely [unpopular](#) in Sudan, and the bilateral agreement with Israel was never signed. Following the [overthrow](#) of the Sudanese government in October 2021 and the country's descent into civil war in April 2023, Sudan drew [closer to Iran](#) and progress on relations with Israel came to a halt.

KAZAKHSTAN: MAINTAINING THE MOMENTUM

The second Trump administration has been pushing to expand the Abraham Accords beyond their initial signatories since coming to power. Progress on bringing in additional Arab states faltered while Israel maintained its military operations in Gaza and beyond. Meanwhile, US Special Envoy Steven Witkoff traveled to Baku in March 2025 to [persuade](#) Azerbaijan to join the accords as well as convince post-Soviet Central Asian governments to sign on. These accessions would be largely symbolic, as each of these former Soviet republics had recognized Israel soon after becoming independent. On November 6, during Kazakhstani President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev's visit to the White House, President Trump announced that Astana was formally joining the Abraham Accords. As part of the visit, Astana and Washington signed 29 deals [reportedly](#) worth \$17 billion. No details initially emerged of how Kazakhstan's accession to the Abraham Accords may change the nature or intensity of its existing relationship with Israel.

THE AMERICAN ROLE

During the presidency of Barack Obama, Washington kept high-level channels open between Israelis, Palestinians, and Arab Gulf states. In 2015, the US

[hosted](#) Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) leaders at Camp David to deepen missile-defense and maritime security cooperation, aligning the Gulf states and Israel around shared threat perceptions, [particularly regarding Iran](#), which made strategic cooperation more politically feasible. That same year, Israel quietly opened a [mission](#) to the International Renewable Energy Agency in Abu Dhabi, and in 2016, the US signed a record \$38 billion [security memorandum](#) of understanding (MoU) with Israel, making normalization with regional neighbors less risky from the latter's perspective.

Over the next three years, the Trump administration built on and transformed these conditions into

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public agreements. On his first trip abroad, President Trump [visited](#) Saudi Arabia, Israel, and the West Bank, where he spoke about the need to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as a prerequisite to broader Israeli-Arab normalization; and the US president pointedly referenced peace between Israel and its neighbors as necessary for creating a coordinated anti-Iran bloc. Trump charged top White House advisors with [leading](#) back-channel talks that culminated in the August 13, 2020, [UAE-Israeli Abraham Accords deal](#), followed by [Bahrain's entry](#) and the White House signing [ceremony](#). To help push through the Emirati-Israeli agreement, the US advanced a [\\$23 billion](#) F-35 and drone sale to the UAE. Trump's approach effectively sidelined the Palestinian issue.

The Biden administration built on the Abraham Accords with the inaugural Negev Forum conference, hosted by Israel in March 2022, which saw the foreign ministers of Bahrain, Egypt, Morocco, the UAE, and the US travel to Israel — a first for the Emirati, Bahraini, and Moroccan foreign ministers — to discuss regional security and economic cooperation. The group reconvened in January 2023 in Abu Dhabi with an agenda that included “initiatives that could strengthen the Palestinian economy and improve the quality of life of the Palestinian people.” That working group meeting was the largest single gathering of Arab and Israeli officials since the 1991 Madrid peace conference. Morocco was slated to host the next high-level Negev Forum conference, but it was postponed and ultimately canceled in June 2023, amid strained diplomatic relations following Israel’s announcement of new settlement expansions in the West Bank.

The Biden administration also concentrated on bringing [Saudi Arabia](#) to the table by offering a comprehensive US-Saudi defense treaty, including security guarantees and assistance developing the kingdom’s civil nuclear program. This arrangement, which was [reportedly nearing completion](#) shortly before Hamas carried out its terrorist attack on Israel on October 7, 2023, included undefined assurances that steps would be taken to improve the lives of Palestinians — a noted departure from previous Saudi insistence on a [two-state solution](#).

Hoping to [expand](#) the Abraham Accords, second [Trump administration](#) officials and diplomats have repeatedly raised the prospect of normalization with Israel in various Arab capitals, including [Beirut](#), [Damascus](#), and [Riyadh](#).

Congress has also taken steps to support the Abraham Accords. In January 2022, a bipartisan group of US representatives [founded](#) the House

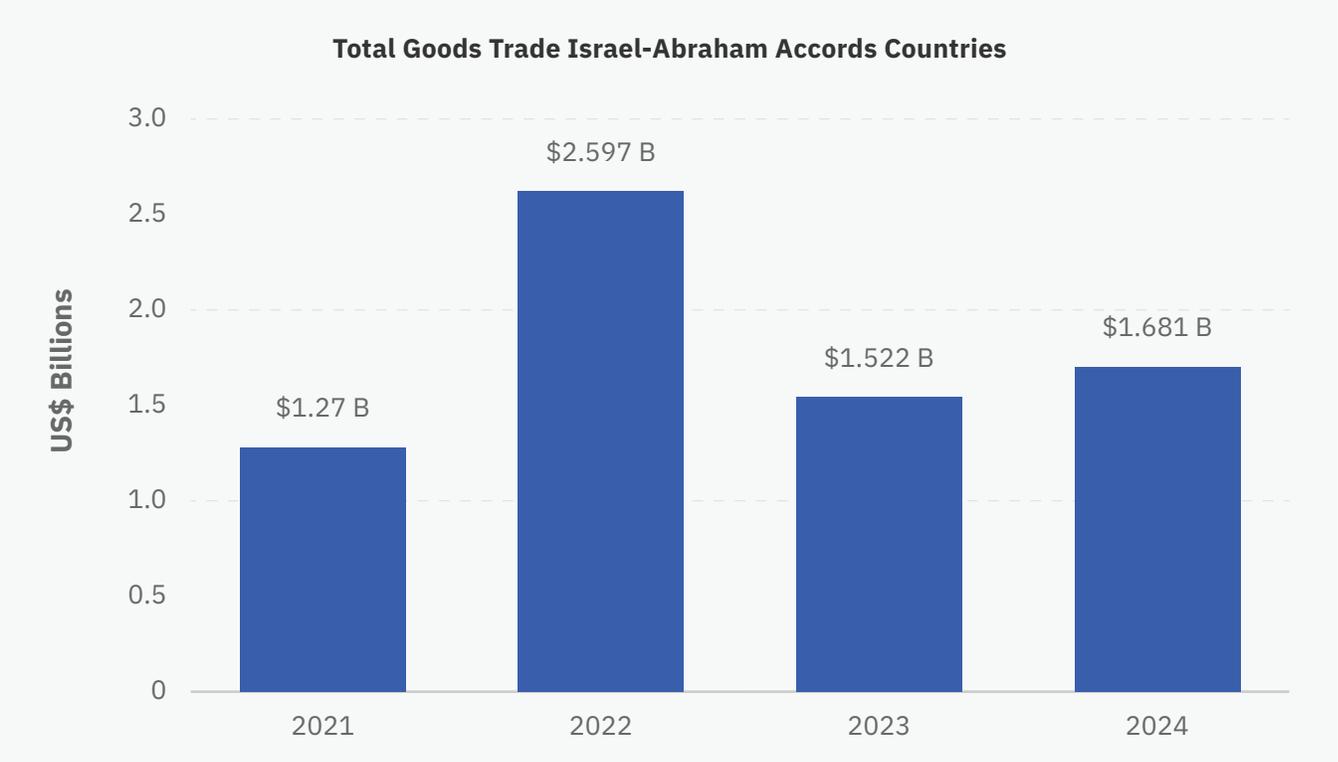
Abraham Accords Caucus to strengthen the existing agreements and lay the groundwork for further normalization deals. The caucus was [relaunched](#) in February 2025, and that June the same lawmakers [formed](#) the bipartisan Gaza Working Group to engage Abraham Accords countries on planning for the “day after” in the devastated coastal strip. The US [Senate counterpart](#) of the House caucus pushed for

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passage of the [2021 Israel Relations Normalization Act](#), charging the US State Department with developing a strategy for expanding and strengthening the Abraham Accords; the [2022 DEFEND Act](#), requiring the Defense Department to find new approaches for Arab partners and Israel to implement an integrated air-defense network; the [2023 MARITIME Act](#), tasking the Pentagon with developing a regional integrated maritime domain awareness and interdiction capability; and several National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) [provisions](#) enhancing diplomatic, military, and intelligence cooperation with partners in the Middle East.

US INTERESTS IN ADVANCING ISRAELI-ARAB NORMALIZATION

Washington advanced the Abraham Accords with the hope they would serve multiple core US interests in the Middle East, including support for partners, regional stability, freedom of navigation, counterterrorism, and the containment of Iran. By expanding a US-aligned [security architecture](#) that enhances intelligence sharing, integrated air and missile defense, and maritime coordination among regional partners, the accords were expected to strengthen deterrence against hostile actors and ensure the flow of energy resources through



Source: UN Comtrade Database

	2021	2022	2023	2024
Bahrain	\$6,617,000	\$12,743,000	\$18,224,722	\$12,781,000
Morocco	\$41,755,000	\$56,169,000	\$238,356,873	\$239,622,000
UAE	\$1,221,410,000	\$2,528,309,000	\$1,265,753,252	\$1,428,880,000

Source: UN Comtrade Database

vital maritime chokepoints. They opened [durable channels](#) for government-to-government and private-sector collaboration in energy, logistics, aviation, and technology, creating economic interdependence with the potential to reinforce political stability and reduce the likelihood of conflict. They also provided a scalable [diplomatic framework](#), through mechanisms like the [Negev Forum](#), that Washington could use to coordinate multilateral responses to security crises, advance counterterrorism cooperation, and promote non-proliferation goals, ultimately reinforcing a regional order favorable to US interests.

Beyond those goals, the Abraham Accords were envisioned as aiding the US in achieving its broader strategic objectives by limiting China’s growing economic and diplomatic inroads in the Middle East. By fostering multilateral economic ties, through avenues like trade, mutual investment, and people-to-people exchange, the Abraham Accords offered a regional counterbalance to China’s [Belt and Road Initiative](#), reinforcing American influence and offering partners an alternative to Beijing-driven infrastructure and investment strategies.



Ben Gurion Airport in Lod on June 23, 2022, following the arrival of the first Emirates airline flight from the UAE to Israel. Source: Jack Guez via Getty Images.

ECONOMIC AND STRATEGIC CONSEQUENCES

The Abraham Accords marked a strategic realignment in the Middle East between Israel and several Gulf states, driven in part by their shared perception of Iran as a [regional threat](#). Following the signing of the accords, the [UAE](#) and [Bahrain](#) exchanged diplomatic representatives with [Israel](#).

These diplomatic ties opened the door for new bilateral [business partnerships](#), leading to [increased investment](#) and economic opportunity in the region. One of the most significant outcomes was the signing of the [Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement](#) between Israel and the UAE in 2023. This deal — [the largest](#) between Israel and any Arab country — sought to boost bilateral trade with the aim of reaching more than [\\$10 billion](#) over five years. However, the real rise in trade flows has been fairly modest,

following a brief spike in 2022, and was adversely affected by the war in Gaza.

In the years following their signing, the Abraham Accords provided a foundation for broader regional integration efforts and the establishment of new transcontinental trade corridors. One mechanism for furthering such ties was the Negev Forum, which brought together Bahrain, Egypt, Morocco, the UAE, the US, and Israel for a series of meetings on regional security and economic cooperation. At the group's initial meeting, held in Israel in March 2022, the participants agreed to form six working groups on clean energy, education and coexistence, food and water security, health, regional security, and tourism. Yet subsequent tensions over the expansion of Israeli settlements in the West Bank, and later the war in Gaza, interrupted additional progress under this format. In July 2022, Israel, India, the UAE, and the US created the [I2U2 Group](#) focusing on joint investments and new initiatives

in water, food, transportation, energy, space, and health, and in September 2023, the Biden administration pushed for the development of the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor ([IMEC](#)). However, the Gaza war likewise put most of those plans on hold.

Tourism also [flourished](#) following the signing of the accords, at least for a time and mostly in one direction: Israel and the UAE lifted [visa requirements](#) for each other's citizens, and by 2023, more than 1 million Israelis had visited the [UAE](#), supported by 106 weekly direct flights. By contrast, only about [1,600 Emiratis](#) had traveled to Israel since normalization, and officials noted that this figure dropped even further after [October 7, 2023](#). Bahrain [opened its airspace](#) to facilitate traffic between the two countries, though actual tourism exchanges were minimal, with only a few hundred [Bahrainis visiting Israel](#) in the early years of normalization.

In addition to trade and people-to-people ties, the accords spurred the development of strategic Israeli-Arab [military cooperation](#) and [security agreements](#). In January 2021, the US Department of Defense transferred Israel from the US European Command area of responsibility to that of the US Central Command (CENTCOM), following the coordination of [joint military exercises](#) between Israel and the UAE in 2020. Taken together, these policies facilitated the creation of the US-led integrated regional air-defense shield to counter the missile threat from Iran — first prominently put to the test in April 2024, when Iran directly targeted Israel with mass missile and drone salvos. In addition to this operational coordination, Arab states accounted for 24% of Israel's \$12.5 billion in [defense exports](#) in 2022. Israel's [agreement](#) to supply the SPYDER air-defense system to the UAE in September 2022 and to [sell](#) anti-drone systems and unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) to Bahrain in July 2022 were key elements of this defense-industrial cooperation.

[Shared cybersecurity threats](#) have been another important area for greater coordination. Cyber

intelligence and diplomacy cooperation between the UAE and Israel [rapidly accelerated](#) following the accords, as seen with reports of [intelligence sharing](#) between Israel and the UAE to counter Hizballah cyberattacks in 2021 and Dubai's role hosting the Israeli cyber conference "[Cybertech Global](#)" in April 2021. In February 2023, the US Department of Homeland Security [convened](#) the first dialogue between US, Israeli, Emirati, Bahraini, and Moroccan cybersecurity officials, with commitments to extend intelligence sharing through the Abraham Accords framework.

CURRENT STATUS AND PROSPECTS FOR FURTHER ENLARGEMENT

Unlike previous diplomatic agreements such as the 1978 Camp David Accords, the 2020 Abraham Accords centered primarily on the normalization of diplomatic relations with states that had not been in open conflict with each other. And while the accords were accompanied by beneficial trade and economic deals, the signatories [were criticized](#) for abandoning a long-standing Arab condition for normalization: the establishment of a Palestinian state. President of the Palestinian Authority Mahmoud Abbas [condemned](#) the agreements as "a stab in the back of the Palestinian people."

Opposition to the accords became much more [widespread](#), especially among [Arab publics](#), after the onset of the war in Gaza. The resulting [humanitarian crisis](#) for the Palestinian population strained regional relationships involving Israel and chilled potential new agreements. President Trump's stated "[Gaza Riviera](#)" proposal, which called for relocating Palestinians from Gaza to Jordan and Egypt or to [South Sudan](#), alienated Arab states and effectively contradicted the Abraham Accords members' understanding that normalization with Israel would be accompanied by a process toward eventual Palestinian statehood. Despite the criticism and periods of ongoing or

recurring [conflict in the region](#) — including in Gaza, the West Bank, Lebanon, Syria, Yemen, and Iran, all of which have involved Israel to varying degrees and have deteriorated since the accords were signed — the Abraham Accords largely remained intact as they reached their fifth anniversary. No signatory country has formally severed diplomatic ties with Israel or withdrawn from its commitments, although the accords are outwardly in a state of suspended animation. In the UAE, most existing partnerships [remain](#), but few new deals have been signed. Bahrain’s parliament [suspended](#) relations with Israel in November 2023 and recalled the Bahraini ambassador, but this move was largely symbolic as the executive branch retains control over the country’s foreign relations. In Morocco, air links with Israel were [suspended](#) and tourism dropped.

The prospects for further enlargement of the accords seem unclear, particularly among Israel’s Arab neighbors. On the one hand, the initiative remains a point of focus for the US president and his team. Trump explicitly referenced the Abraham Accords in his speech to the Israeli Knesset on October 13, [pledging](#) to add new countries soon and “have that whole thing filled out” — a sentiment he [reiterated](#) in a *Fox Business News* interview later that week.

Other high-level administration officials routinely speak about expanding the accords too. Yet on the other hand, Kazakhstan is still an exception to the current lack of progress. Much recent [speculation](#) focused on Lebanon and Syria, thanks to the election of a government in Beirut dedicated to disarming Hizballah and the toppling of Bashar al-Assad’s regime in Damascus — though neither capital is ready to take that step as long as Israel continues to carry out military operations on their soil. [Attention](#) has also continued to focus on Saudi Arabia; however, Riyadh has [repeatedly made clear](#) that it [refuses](#) to normalize ties without concrete steps toward the realization of a Palestinian state. As a [candidate](#), Trump mused that Iran could be incorporated into the Abraham Accords, though that remains highly unlikely. The Trump administration has also floated ideas about further expanding the accords to [South](#) and [Southeast Asia](#);

and it contends that other Muslim-majority former Soviet republics of the [Caspian region](#), which already have normalized relations with Israel, will follow Kazakhstan in signing on.

Meanwhile, the shared Israeli-Gulf perception of the Iranian threat that, in part, undergirded the Abraham Accords has increasingly come under stress, particularly after Israel’s post-October 7, 2023, retaliatory campaigns against Hamas and Hizballah, and the subsequent Israeli-Iranian conflict in 2025. Israel and the Gulf states have [pursued divergent paths](#), with Israel taking a maximalist military approach toward Iran and its allies, while the Gulf states have prioritized stability, seeking to normalize ties with Tehran and lower the temperature on regional tensions. The future of the accords, including whether states like Saudi Arabia might join them, may depend on whether this strategic divide widens or narrows.

This backgrounder was researched and written by MEI summer 2025 intern Hannah Marx, with additional work by Research Assistants Eryn Gold and Hamad Alshamlan, and input from Senior Fellow Brian Katulis.

ACCESS ADDITIONAL MEI EXPERTISE

The Middle East Institute has a number of renowned experts who are well versed on the topic of the Abraham Accords, including MEI [Senior Fellow Brian Katulis](#), [Senior Fellow Lucy Kurtzer-Ellenbogen](#), [Senior Fellow Natan Sachs](#), [Associate Fellow Daniel Benaim](#), and [Associate Fellow Yoel Guzansky](#). Our experts are available for interviews or commentary.

For assistance with reaching Mr. Katulis or any of our scholars, please email media@mei.edu or call 202-785-1141 ext. 241.