

Abraham Accords: Strategic Realignment within Middle East

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Abstract

Strategic realignment within the Middle East has been a preeminent outcome of the Abraham Accords. These alignments for achieving strategic goals have encouraged UAE and Bahrain to move their ties with Israel, from the backchannels to open cooperation. This has signalled the start of a new era, which will heighten the already existing divides within the region and create new ones. While the short-term impact on the signatory states seems positive, the lopsided nature of this agreement based on the strategic benefits to Israel suggests that the long-term implications will be dominated by several predicaments. Since the Arab states are choosing to maintain their commitment to normalize ties with Israel, the region may experience a “New Middle Eastern cold war”. The initiation of quadrilateral cooperation between UAE, Israel, US, and India can morph into a Middle Eastern Quad; this partnership will favour the signatory states at the expense of the Palestinians. At the same time, Oman’s dwindling impartiality towards Middle Eastern rivalries and Saudi Arabia’s secret engagements with Israeli suggests that realignments within the region will continue to gain momentum.

Keywords

Strategic realignment, Strategic Reorientation, Middle Eastern Quad, Counter-alliance, Middle Eastern cold war, New regional architecture

Introduction

The signing of the Abraham Accords laid out a convenient roadmap to establish diplomatic ties between the once presumed rivals: UAE, Bahrain, and Israel. Signed on the 15th of September 2020, the Accords are a series of peace agreements brokered by the United States in hope of establishing peace within the region. The name Abraham refers to the great father of the three Abrahamic religions: Islam, Christianity, and Judaism; it

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promotes unity between the Jews and the Arab world by recognizing their shared patriarch.¹

These agreements set up a stage for full-fledged partnerships in terms of security, economics and significant strategic benefits for all parties involved. The first country to sign the agreement was UAE followed by Bahrain. The Palestinian leadership condemned the signatory states for normalizing ties with Israel. In protest, the Palestinian Authority left its chairmanship of the Arab League meetings and called back their ambassadors from both the states.²

The third state to normalize ties with Israel under these Accords was Sudan. Although the scope of this agreement is yet to be determined, the initial rewards to Sudan include its removal from the list of countries supporting terrorism.³ This was followed by the dismissal of sanctions imposed on the country and the opening up of trade and investment opportunities. A few months later, in December 2020, Morocco became the fourth state to establish diplomatic ties with Israel. As a token of appreciation, the Trump administration recognized Morocco's annexation of western Sahara and allowed it to claim sovereignty over the land.⁴

While these Accords are considered a significant breakthrough, the unofficial and informal ties between UAE, Bahrain and Israel date back to the 1990s.⁵ The Oslo Accords led to the advancement of clandestine and informal ties between these states. Signed on 13th September between the Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin and Mahmoud Abbas, the negotiator of Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), these Accords were a landmark moment in pursuit of peace in the region. The Israeli government accepted PLO as the representatives of the Palestinian people, and PLO in return renounced terrorism. Both the sides agreed on the establishment of a Palestinian Authority which was to assume responsibilities in the West Bank and Gaza Strip for a period of five years.⁶ Ties developed between Israel and the Arab states since the signing of the Oslo Accords were kept under wraps due to the fear of unacceptance among the Arab publics toward normalizing relations with Israel as long as the Palestinian people were under occupation.⁷ Thus, while appearing to be opponents at face, the parties have been strengthening business and security ties through backchannels for years.⁸ Nonetheless, the 2020 Accords are significant due

to their strategic implications and their success in compelling other Middle Eastern States, including Morocco and Sudan to follow suit.

The Accords not only succeed in officially normalizing ties at the business, commercial and diplomatic fronts, but also play a consequential role in shaping strategic alignments within the Middle East. These alignments have the potential of developing strategic alternatives for states to secure their national interests inside and outside the region.

The paper studies the emerging strategic reorientation within the Middle East as an aftermath of the Abraham Accords. It also dwells upon the implications of this consequential strategic shift, taking into account the role of both state and non-state actors within the region. It identifies the changing dynamics of relations between multiple states of the region in relation to the Arab-Israel rivalry. The paper further highlights the focus of India towards the Middle East and the possibility of creation of a New Quad. It also analyses the future of this strategic shift in reference to recent developments in the Middle Eastern politics and studies the possibility of Oman and Saudi Arabia being the next states to normalize ties with Tel Aviv.

Theoretical Framework

The Rational Choice theory signifies the importance of self-interest in making decisions.⁹ It states that choices are made on the basis what serves you best. After thorough scrutinization of all options available, you land on what is likely to be of advantage to you. The application of the theory on the study suggests that the signing of the Abraham Accords, and the changing strategic dynamics in the region are an outcome of careful consideration of costs and rewards by the Middle Eastern states. Moreover, in accordance with the theory, these states did not make choices as unconscious drivers influenced by traditions and the political environment of the region. In contrast, they made a rational choice that suggested that the benefits of normalization of ties with Israel for them outweighed the adverse consequences of this action.

The Regional Security Complex Theory (RCST) asserts that the national security interests of states in a region are so intertwined, and that they cannot be studied or addressed in isolation from one another. In other words, the security concerns of one state in a region cannot be understood

without evaluating the security concerns of its neighbours.¹⁰ This suggests that the security-based interdependence of states within the Middle East has motivated them to sign Abraham Accords. The Accords will help strengthen alliances between signatory states to address their biggest security concern in the region i.e., Iran. It also helps us understand the changing patterns of amity and enmity, which, in turn, helps in analysing the shifting alignments within the Middle East.

Both the theories have been used to analyse the motivational factors behind UAE and Bahrain followed by Morocco and Sudan's decision to normalize ties with Israel. The Rational Choice theory helps determine the national interests of the signatory states, while the Regional Security Complex Theory helps understand how and why these interests converge on a regional level. In short, both the theories have been employed to analyse the collective action of states to sign the Abraham Accords.

Significance of Abraham Accords

The signing of the Abraham Accords has signalled the beginning of a shift in regional dynamics. Based on shared regional security perceptions, UAE and Bahrain later followed by Morocco and Sudan have developed a momentum for normalization of ties with Israel.¹¹ While these Accords are being hailed a step toward peace-building within the Middle East, the future implications are yet to be studied. At present, the Middle East seems to be more divided than ever. Previously converging sympathies toward the Palestine cause has now turned into a bone of contention among the states. In the long term, a divergence of views on the Palestine and other security issues is likely to exacerbate grievances among the parties.

The Accords are aimed at maintaining peace with Israel and not within Middle East. Thus, it is yet to be determined if the gains of this peace move would ultimately be more than the costs the stakeholders will have to pay. The primary beneficiary of the Accords, Israel, will however continue to benefit from the agreements. Similarly, the Abraham Accords also seem to be an effort by America to mollify the powerful Israeli lobby in the US.¹² The American-Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPCA), ranked the second strongest lobbies within the government has a watertight influence on US foreign policy in the Middle East.¹³ Not only does the committee fund major electoral campaigns but is believed to be behind Trump's decision to

relocate the Jewish embassy to Jerusalem.¹⁴ This validates the perception that the Abraham Accords will ensure that the Israelis continue to benefit from the agreements. In other words, the Accords will act as a medium for the Israelis to influence the American foreign policy in the region.

It is important to note that Israel has emerged as the primary beneficiary of the Abraham Accords. This is because these Accords allow the Zionist state to see itself as a key player at the global stage. It feels more emboldened than ever to play a role beyond its immediate neighbourhood.¹⁵ Moreover, with its settler-oriented projects expanding in Palestine, it seems that Israel is now more determined than ever to marginalize and assail the Palestinian population. This claim is supported by the fact that in May 2021, Israel launched its third major assault on the Gaza strip in 10 years. Another reason why the agreement is evidently lopsided is the fact that Israel did not have to make any tangible concessions to please either of the signatory states.¹⁶ While UAE claimed to have reached an agreement with Israel to stop further annexation of Palestinian lands, Netanyahu clarified that the agreements only required him to temporarily halt the annexation.

Furthermore, contrary to the claims made by Israel and the United States, the Accords have nothing to do with peace. In fact, it has led the Israelis to believe that they no longer need to be at peace with Palestine to forge diplomatic ties with Arab states.¹⁷ The Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett stated that he had no interest in reviving the Israeli-Palestine peace process.¹⁸ As a result, Israel continues its systemic cleansing of Palestinians.¹⁹ Moreover, Israel and Jordan's relations reaching its lowest point in 2020 since the signing of the peace treaty suggests that the Zionist state will never compromise on its own interests and will never go out of its way to defend any Arab state.²⁰ Thus giving it an upper hand in all deals made as an outcome of the Abraham Accords. These Accords have given Israel the authority to reject any peace proposal in respect of Palestine, and most importantly the agreements have helped Tel Aviv convince many Palestinians that the two-state solution is dead. Thus, up till now, Israel remains the biggest beneficiary of these peace agreements.

Nevertheless, the Accords have been able to withstand a series of tests that surfaced during Israel's recent efforts to annex Sheikh Jarrah.²¹ Israel's disproportionate use of force saw no condemnation by other signatories of

the Accords. Arab states chose not to pressurize Tel Aviv to stop the use of force against Palestinians or to initiate negotiations on the subject.²² There was little or no pro-Palestinian sentiment exhibited by the government of UAE or Bahrain, which indicates that Israel has succeeded in cultivating acceptance of its legitimacy and right to use force against the Palestinians at the societal level as well. These incidents also helped expose how little leverage UAE has over Israel.²³ In other words, the Abraham Accords have curtailed the ability of UAE and Bahrain to react to any Israeli action. At no point the signatories threatened to walk out of the Accords, hence displaying their commitment to maintain ties with Israel.

Strategic Realignment within Middle East

The alignment of UAE and Bahrain with Israel is aimed at achieving their strategic goals. The two most significant of them being security, and economic stability. In terms of economy, the agreements open up opportunities for the Arab signatories in multiple sectors including tourism, trade, technology transfer, energy, telecommunications, food security, legal cooperation and FDI.²⁴ These likely benefits have been a point of attraction for the Arab states.

While collaboration at the economic front did exist prior to the normalization of ties, the signing of the Accords has given a new impetus to their relations with Israel and has helped widen the scope of economic cooperation. In addition, unlike previous engagements that were being carried out behind closed doors, the impact of this new found partnership is already noticeable. The bilateral trade between UAE and Israel has risen to \$700 million in 2021 from a mere \$114 in 2020.²⁵ Moreover, to promote joint business ventures, UAE, and Israel along with India and the United States have decided to establish a quadrilateral forum for economic cooperation. This year's Israeli business delegation at the Dubai Expo came forward with an initiative "Beyond Business 2" to become a part of the extensive trade activities between India and Israel.²⁶ A similar interaction between Israel, Japan and UAE in October 2021 also signalled that the three states were keen to engage in economic cooperation.

Furthermore, the signing of the Accords can be seen as an effort by the Arab states to gain favours from the United States. The effort seems to have been worthwhile with US agreeing to sell F-35 stealth multirole jets to

UAE.²⁷ A total package of \$23 billion has been promised containing Raytheon Technology, Lockheed Martin, and 18 MQ-9B Unmanned Ariel Systems from General Atomics.²⁸

Thus, not only have the Abraham Accords removed the interdiction attached to the engagement with Israel but have also helped achieve some positive results. Evidence suggests that the strategic calculation carried out by Bahrain and UAE was not limited to having gains inside but also outside the region. Their aim was also to diversify their strategic relationship for security, economic, military and intelligence purposes to reduce their dependence on the United States.²⁹ The military footprint of America, in the region, is however likely to remain though the Arab states wish to diversify their security portfolio especially with UAE's growing interventionist policy in regional politics. It aims to forge ties with other global actors to counter Iran and Turkey. In short, the primary goal of UAE, Bahrain, and Egypt along with Israel is to dominate the regional balance of power. On the other hand, Bahrain's decision to normalize ties with Israel is an attempt to gain an influential ally against the opposition of the ruling family Al-Khalifa within the state.³⁰ The Al-Khalifa blames Iran of supporting the protests against the rulers. It sought Israeli backing for the regime and to help counter any protests in the future.³¹

One of the most significant points of convergence between the signatories is their antagonism against Iran. The Arab animus towards Iran continues due to the following alleged reasons: its quest for acquisition of nuclear weapons, political provocation, and support to overthrow repressive regimes, maintaining proxy militias, emerging as a leader of the Muslim world, and working to establish its hegemony in the region. These were powerful motives for the Arab states to gain Israeli backing against growing Iranian influence in the region. With more Arab states looking to enhance their security, backing from Israel was a feasible option available to them counter Iranian influence. Development of nuclear technology by Iran has been a security concern for the Arab states for many years, more so after President Trump's withdrawal from JCPOA.

Up till now Iran with the use of proxy warfare has been able to expand its sphere of influence in Yemen, Syria and Lebanon which is a serious source of insecurity for the Arab states. Iran gives support in the form of aid and weapons to the militias to further its strategic interests in the region.³² In

the recent years, Turkey and Qatar have also supported proxy groups.³³ The two states have become the new Middle Eastern Pariahs for their support of Muslim Brotherhood and their enhanced military cooperation with one another. These developments in the region made UAE and Bahrain to strategically reorient and align with Israel.

Implications for the Region

The realignment within Middle East will have far-reaching consequences for all states of the region. The most significant outcome will be the reinforcement of already existing divisions in the region, and the creation of new ones. The scope of these divisions will continue to expand with Palestine becoming a new point of contention among Middle Eastern states. This reorientation of a once celebrated unified stance against Israel has created new security challenges for the region. The emerging short term success stories regarding UAE and Bahrain are likely to bring about a domino effect as more Arab states would look to normalize ties with Israel. This could lead to the establishment of two blocs within Middle East, hence allowing extra regional powers to exploit the schisms in the ranks of these countries.

These divisions will ensure that proxies in the form of insurgent and terrorist groups will continue to operate in different countries of the region. The primary victims will be the common citizens, and states will continue to promote their interest at the expense of the security of their people. Growing grievances of individuals against Israel and the US is stoking extremism and radicalization in the Middle East. This would lead to increased factionalism and emergence of new radical groups. The rise of new factions will bring about new struggles reducing space for reconstruction, and peace-building efforts.

Furthermore, groups such as Hezbollah and Hamas view UAE and Bahrain as their new adversaries. With backing from Iran, they are likely to expand their sphere of actions to these states also causing instability there. Such actions by Hezbollah and Hamas would incentivize Abraham Accord signatory states to enhance military cooperation with Israel, and sign new security and military agreements with extra-regional powers. Such collaborations will result in an arms race in the Middle East.

The strategic realignment of Arab states to fortify their security is likely to create space for external actors to pursue their own agendas. The invitation by UAE to build Quadrilateral forums with global actors such as China and Russia with the help of Israel will give these states a leverage to influence politics of the region, and likely retaliation by the US, thus giving rise to a Middle Eastern cold war.

Furthermore, the role of regional Arab organizations such as GCC and Arab League will be further undermined, and these organizations will become increasingly more ineffective in future. Lastly, strategic realignment will weaken the Palestinian cause. Though the humanitarian crisis unleashed by Israel will appear in TV news and newspaper reports, but no efforts will be made by the international community to find a solution to the Palestine problem.

A New Quad on the Horizon?

The international system has witnessed a rise in what is termed as minilateralism.³⁴ Stemming from the practice of multilateralism, minilateralism refers to the breakdown of complex issues into smaller ones to help address them more efficiently.³⁵ This targeted initiative is used to address an issue concerning fewer states with the same interest and resolve it within a finite period of time. In short, this approach is ad hoc, has fewer number of participants, and it is comparatively effective. With the signing of the Abraham Accords, minilateralism seems to be proliferating from the Indo-Pacific to the Middle East. There are multiple factors driving such a significant shift in approach towards the region. This part of the paper analyses the possibility for the creation of a Quad within Middle East in the perspective of India's expanding strategic influence.

October 18th, 2020 marked the start of quadrilateral cooperation between USA, Israel, UAE, and India. The foreign ministers of the four states carried out a virtual meeting discussing possible areas of collaboration. The talks were focused on expanding political and economic cooperation encompassing maritime security, trade, energy, and climate change challenges within Middle East. However, the Indian External Affairs Minister Dr Jaishankar described the talks to have a greater scope than what was anticipated. His statements not only signalled the possibility of

an expeditious follow-up but also hinted towards the institutionalization of the dialogue process.

The initiation of this collaboration is an outcome of the Abraham Accords that helped open a route for collaboration between previously diplomatically disassociated states. With UAE and Israel welcoming each other, the possibility for increased cooperation bilaterally, multilaterally, or minilaterally cannot be overlooked. It has paved way for the creation of new partnerships at the international level across multiple regions. Seeing it as a significant opportunity to put their interests, UAE, Israel, US, and India are looking for possible approaches to strengthen their partnership. Hence, while the creation of a Middle Eastern Quad may not be witnessed anytime soon, the probability of such an outcome cannot be ruled out.

Due to their overarching coherent strategic interests, aforementioned states may choose to institutionalize their partnership allowing them to advance their interests with assistance of one another. Moreover, partnering with US shall provide UAE and India the much sought after economic, political, and military support. However, while US, Israel and India may be aligned to counter growing Chinese footprint within the region, the same could not be said about UAE. At present, UAE and China are working towards a comprehensive strategic partnership. The Chinese State Councillor labelled these bilateral relations a 'unique example'.³⁶ In addition, the US intelligence found evidence regarding the construction of a Chinese military facility in UAE which stopped after intervention by Washington.³⁷ UAE is an economic beneficiary of its partnership with China. Furthermore, the US-UAE relationship is strained presently, with Abu Dhabi suspending its F-35 multi-billion-dollar deal with America over frustration because Biden administration is trying to limit sale of Chinese technology to the Gulf.³⁸ This suggests that United Arab Emirates is highly unlikely to become a part of a security-oriented Quad at the expense of its relations with Beijing. Its core interest at present seems to be oriented towards maintaining economic superiority and prominence as an investment hub in the Middle East. Thus, the UAE, Israel, India, US partnership would be limited to the economic sector for now and Abu Dhabi will choose to stay out of the growing US-China global rivalry. Nevertheless, this unprecedented case of strategic realignment within Middle East shall have far reaching impact in the region as a whole. These new partnerships will play out in favour of some and against other states,

particularly that of Iran and Palestine. Nonetheless, it seems highly unlikely that either of the parties would back down from their decision to normalize relations with Israel for security reasons.

The Future of Strategic Realignment within the Region

Strategic reorientation within Middle East is steaming ahead with newfound momentum. The impetus for this momentum is the policy change by the United States to restore mutual compliance of the 2015 Iranian nuclear deal. Attending a historic summit held on 28th March, 2022 at the southern city of Israel, Sde Boker, the foreign ministers of Bahrain, Egypt, Israel, Morocco, and UAE openly expressed their disappointment with United States for possibly settling for a “weak deal” with Iran. These ministers claimed that this deal will further reinforce Iranian efforts to destabilize the region. Hence, as US comes closer to striking a deal with Iran, Israel along with the Arab states look for ways to strengthen their Alliance.³⁹

As these states look to establish a “new regional architecture”, the scope of their partnership continues to widen. In the beginning of February 2022, Israel signed a security agreement with Bahrain signalling the start of military, cyber and maritime cooperation between Israel and the Gulf states. This collaboration is expected to spread to the realm of maritime security which is crucial in countering Iranian influence in the region.⁴⁰ It is important to note that security cooperation between the Gulf states and Israel will not only help counter Iran but will also fill up the vacuum created by the gradual US disengagement from the region.

Furthermore, these realignments send a message to the world that Arab states are no longer bound by pan-Arab solidarities and sensitivities which include the Palestinian cause. The absence of Palestinian sentiments or even symbolic show of solidarity at the recent meeting of the foreign ministers is a momentous breakthrough for the Israeli-Arab partnership. It is a huge win for Israel as it promises unconstrained partnership with the Arab States. In addition, it presents a significant opportunity for these states to act as a pressure group against the possibility of US-Iran agreement on revival of JCPOA. Thus, this growing partnership will be consequential for regional politics as it sends a clear signal to other Arab states, especially Oman, to collaborate with Israel for promoting peace and

stability in the region. Hence, pressure on states that were having second thoughts about signing the Accords continues to increase. These states can now see that the balance of power seems to be shifting in favour of the states supporting Israel.

Trade deals between the Arab states and Israel suggest that economic relations between the two parties are also expanding. Free trade agreement signed between Abu Dhabi and Tel Aviv on 1st April 2022 guarantees waving off custom tariffs on 95% of goods.⁴¹ Thus paving the way for economic cooperation between the two states. The strategic reorientation within Middle East has so far been beneficial for the Abraham Accord signatories. The changes in political dynamics in the Middle East flourished due to the weakening of the Palestinian national movement, giving the Gulf states space to prioritize their own national interests.⁴² Thus, while the formal alliance between the Arab states and Israel at first made strategic sense, it now seems to be accruing economic benefits as well. Therefore, the future of strategic realignment in the region appears to be propitious.

According to some reports, Oman is likely to be the next Arab state to formalize ties with Tel Aviv.⁴³ It is important to note that Oman's relations with Israel do not and will not be based on countering regional forces that are adversarial to Israel in the Middle East. Muscat aims to stand by its policy of positive neutrality with the desire to maintain good relations with all states in the region, including Iran.⁴⁴ However, in order to maintain this position, it is imperative for a state to consolidate its economic position. Oman's ability to maintain impartiality in the past was possible due to its economic autonomy and lukewarm response for financial support from its neighbours.⁴⁵ With Oman now unofficially seeking financial assistance from the Gulf states, its long-sustained policy of non-alignment seems to be at stake. Some analysts suggest that due to increasing polarization in the region, the GCC foreign ministers are unlikely to have a unified stance on the issue. Moreover, any assistance to Oman would not be without any strings attached.⁴⁶

As a consequence of the COVID-19 Pandemic and low oil prices, Oman's economy was hit hard. Other Gulf States were not as much affected. Oman's dwindling economy is making hard for it to stay away from the UAE-Saudi nexus. Its recent move to get closer to Riyadh was also aimed at boosting

Oman's economy. Investment and financial assistance from Riyadh can help Oman address its economic challenges.⁴⁷ Thus, on 7th December 2022 Oman and Saudi Arabia signed an economic and investment deal worth \$30 billion dollars.⁴⁸ If economic ties between the two states continue to strengthen, Oman may finally be persuaded to relinquishing its neutral position. In other words, unless Oman succeeds in rebuilding its economy and reducing dependence on external assistance in the long run, it is likely that both Saudi Arabia and UAE will pressurise it into adopting a position. Under such circumstances, Oman will evaluate its strategic interests. Nonetheless, at present, Muscat's national interests seem incompatible with both the blocs. At one hand, Oman is in disagreement with Riyadh over Yemen and on the other hand it does not wish to join Israel to counter Iran. Thus, at present it is unlikely that Oman would let go its neutral position to join Saudi Arabia or states signatory to Abraham Accords. Oman's interests are best served if it can succeed in retaining its position. Its role as a mediator in the region is highly significant.⁴⁹ Therefore, unless the pressure on Oman builds up significantly, and it fails to develop its economy, it is unlikely that it will look to join sides.

On the other hand, Saudi mindset towards Israel seems to be undergoing a symbolic shift. Unlike other Arab states, Saudi Arabia chose to remain silent and made no effort to condemn the monumental deal between UAE and Israel,⁵⁰ instead, it called Israel a potential ally. Moreover, on 14th July 2022, the Saudi General Authority of Civil Aviation stated that the kingdom was ready to open its airspace to all Israeli air carriers.⁵¹ While it claims to have taken this decision to consolidate Saudi Arabia's position as a global hub connecting three continents, the decision is a clear indication of warming ties between the two states. According to multiple sources, the United States is avidly working on a road map for the normalization of ties with Israel.⁵² Moreover, the Wall Street Journal recently claimed that the two states were privately engaging in economic and security talks.⁵³ A growing number of Israeli officials seem to be flying to the kingdom as the two states secretly discuss avenues of cooperation. One of the most conspicuous driving factors of this unprecedented engagement is Iran. Attacks by Iran on Saudi oil facilities and its presence in its backyard Yemen, have compelled the state to look towards normalizing ties with Israel. In other words, as a result of the consistent Saudi-Iran power struggle, Saudi Arabia is willing to cooperate with Israel.⁵⁴ Riyadh also sees

its engagement with Israel as a way of increasing its acceptance at international level.⁵⁵ It will open doors for the crown prince to cultivate stronger relationships with the Western world. This will in turn allow Saudi Arabia to play a greater role in world politics. The prince will also use any present and future ties with Israel as a way of muffling doubts about his governing abilities, and statesmanship especially in relation to his role in Yemen and the major backlash he faced on an international level.⁵⁶

It is important to note that the normalization of ties between the two states are of equal significance to Israel. Apart from the economic and security benefits, the kingdom will help open doors to other Arab states for Israel.⁵⁷ It will motivate other states within and outside of Middle East to normalize ties with Israel. This shall reinforce Israel's position as a key player in global politics.

While the momentum for engagement between the two parties continues to increase, Israel and Saudi Arabia will only engage with each other in secret for now. The kingdom is already downplaying its recent efforts to engage with Israel.⁵⁸ It seems like that for few years, both Israel and Riyadh will use backchannels to increase cooperation on the economic and security fronts. Thus, the term normalization needs to be used more cautiously in relation to ties between the two states. Instead, this new relationship can be termed as "implicit normalization". This means that any future engagements will be partly hidden from the public eye and both Riyadh and Tel Aviv will not be bound by any formal legal commitments.⁵⁹

A New Middle Eastern Cold War

All of the aforementioned realignments in the region suggest that a new Middle Eastern cold war may be brewing. Explicit normalization between Israel, UAE, and Bahrain followed by implicit normalization between Saudi Arabia and Israel will heighten Iranian fear as it tips the regional balance in favour of its competitors. The anti-Iranian nexus is becoming more powerful as UAE and Israel continue to increase efforts to counter Iran. Reports have indicated that the two parties are increasing their security and intelligence cooperation efforts after a series of attacks on Abu Dhabi by Iran backed militants in Yemen.⁶⁰ As a result of this strengthening relationship between the signatory parties, Iran is clearly facing a security

dilemma that is compelling it to evaluate its options. For decades Iran and Israel have been fighting a shadow war characterized by assassinations, kidnappings, and cyber operations. And this new phase of tension can bring them closer to starting a cold war in the region.

With Syria and Iraq leaning towards Iran due to strategic and political reasons, the Middle East clearly seems to be divided into two blocs. In an effort to counter the Israeli backed bloc, Tehran made efforts to turn Iraq against the Abraham Accord. As a result, on 26th May 2020, the Iraqi parliament passed a bill that criminalized normalization of ties with Israel.⁶¹

Tehran views the Arab Israeli military cooperation as threat to the region's status quo and existing offensive-defensive balance.⁶² It may choose to counter this threat in two ways. Firstly, Tehran may accelerate its nuclear program. At one side US seems to be ready to sign a deal with Iran which shall appease many of Iran's demands including removal of sanctions.⁶³ On the other hand, Iran has signed a 25-year comprehensive cooperation agreement with Beijing.⁶⁴ Both these deals combined shall give Iran substantial leverage to develop its nuclear program. In opposition, the Israeli bloc has already called out US for settling for a weak deal and it seems that it will continue to strengthen its efforts against Iran to ensure that Iran does not make progress on its nuclear program.

Secondly, Iran will choose to project its power and enhance its deterrence by increasing its support to proxies in Yemen, Iraq, and Syria.⁶⁵ However, it seems at this point, Israel and UAE are eager to make every effort to reduce Iranian influence in these regions including the Gaza strip. Both Israel and the US have started to lay the groundwork for the establishment of a security alliance with Arab states. The aim is to connect the air defence systems of Israel with the Arab states to counter Iranian drone and missile attacks; these developments signal to the creation of a "Middle East Air Defence Alliance."⁶⁶ Unless de-escalation efforts are made, increasing tension between Tel Aviv and Iran can result in the start of a Middle Eastern Cold War. This outcome will be the opposite of what US claims to achieve through the signing of the Abraham Accords i.e., Peace.

Conclusion

The signing of the Abraham Accords has laid a foundation for the normalization of ties between the Arab states and Israel. While the long-

term impact of Accords is yet to unfold, the collaboration between the signatories suggests that strategic realignment within the region would continue to strengthen. Nevertheless, it is vital to note that the Accords being lopsided make Israel the primary beneficiary. A likely but undesirable consequence of Abraham Accords may adversely affect the security situation in the Gulf. In short, the adverse effect on the security of Middle East may outweigh the gains achieved through the signing of the Abraham Accords. So far, the signatories have adhered to the provisions of the Accords though it was severely tested in recent confrontations between Israel and Palestine, indicating that Bahrain and UAE will not revert to their old policies.

Strategic reorientation within Middle East has created division among the Arab states, and new alignments are being made. This shall have repercussions for all states in the region without exception. At present, there has been some talk in India, regarding creation of a Middle Eastern Quad; however, such a move is not yet on the horizon. The realignments within Middle East seem to be strengthening as points of convergence between partner states continue to increase. With UAE strengthening its partnership with Israel on the economic, military and security front and Riyadh moving towards developing implicit ties with Israel, Iran seems to be evaluating its options to counter an Israeli bloc. It seems increasing tensions between these parties will lead to the start of Middle East cold war that can destabilize the region in the long run.

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