



The Geostrategic Implications of the Abraham Accords on Regional Power Dynamics: A Comprehensive Analysis through the Lens of Balance of Threat Theory

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ABSTRACT

This comprehensive study examines the profound transformation in Middle Eastern geopolitics following the normalization agreements between Israel and several Arab states, known as the Abraham Accords. Through an extensive application of Stephen Walt's Balance of Threat theory, this research analyzes the complex interplay of security concerns, economic interests, and strategic calculations that have driven this historic realignment. The study employs a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative analysis of official documents, policy statements, and elite interviews with quantitative data on arms transfers, economic cooperation, and diplomatic engagements. Our findings reveal that the Accords represent a fundamental shift in regional alliance structures, moving from ideological confrontation to pragmatic cooperation based on shared threat perceptions. The research demonstrates how the growing influence of Iran and its proxy networks, coupled with changing US engagement in the region, has created conditions for this unprecedented alignment. The study further investigates the implications for regional stability, the Palestinian question, and the broader balance of power in the Middle East. The analysis concludes that while the Accords have created new opportunities for economic cooperation and security coordination, they have also intensified regional polarization and created new security dilemmas that may perpetuate cycles of conflict.

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Introduction: The New Middle Eastern Strategic Landscape

The Middle East is undergoing one of the most significant geopolitical transformations since the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. The signing of the Abraham Accords in 2020 represents a paradigm shift in regional relations, fundamentally altering the dynamics that have characterized Arab-Israeli interactions for over seven decades. This research paper provides a comprehensive examination of this transformation through the theoretical framework of Stephen Walt's Balance of Threat theory, offering a nuanced understanding of the strategic calculations underlying these normalization agreements.

The traditional Arab-Israeli conflict, long considered the central fault line in Middle Eastern politics, has been increasingly overshadowed by a new strategic competition between a coalition of status quo powers and revisionist actors led by Iran. This shift has created unusual alignments, with former adversaries finding common cause against perceived shared threats. The Abraham Accords, involving the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Sudan, and Morocco, signify the most dramatic manifestation of this realignment.

This study argues that the normalization agreements cannot be understood merely as bilateral diplomatic breakthroughs but must be analyzed as components of a broader regional security architecture aimed at containing Iranian influence and addressing shared security concerns. The research

employs a multi-dimensional analysis, examining military, economic, and diplomatic aspects of the Accords while considering their impact on regional stability and the future of conflict resolution in the Middle East.

The significance of this research lies in its timely examination of a rapidly evolving strategic landscape. By applying Walt's theoretical framework to recent developments, the study contributes to both academic understanding and policy-relevant analysis of Middle Eastern security dynamics. The paper is structured to provide a comprehensive overview of the historical context, theoretical foundations, empirical evidence, and future implications of this strategic shift.

Theoretical Framework: Balance of Threat in the Middle Eastern Context

Stephen Walt's Balance of Threat theory provides a robust framework for understanding alliance formation in international politics. Unlike traditional balance of power theory, which focuses primarily on material capabilities, Walt's approach emphasizes that states balance against threats rather than against power alone. The theory identifies four key components that determine threat perception: aggregate power, geographic proximity, offensive capabilities, and aggressive intentions.

In the Middle Eastern context, these components manifest in unique ways. Iran's

aggregate power derives not only from its conventional military capabilities but also from its network of proxy forces across the region, its missile program, and its ability to leverage sectarian affiliations. Geographic proximity makes the threat particularly acute for Gulf Arab states, while Israel perceives Iran's nuclear program and its support for anti-Israeli militant groups as existential threats.

The offensive capabilities of Iran and its allies, demonstrated through missile attacks on Saudi oil facilities, Houthi drone strikes against UAE targets, and Hezbollah's military buildup in Lebanon, have significantly heightened threat perceptions among potential balancing states. Meanwhile, Iranian leaders' rhetoric and regional activities are interpreted as evidence of aggressive intentions, further driving the balancing behavior witnessed in the Abraham Accords.

This theoretical framework helps explain why states that historically opposed Israel now view it as a potential partner. The shared perception of the Iranian threat has overcome ideological differences and historical grievances, creating conditions for strategic cooperation that would have been unthinkable just a decade ago.

Literature Review: Evolving Scholarship on Middle Eastern Alliances

The academic literature on Middle Eastern alliance dynamics has evolved significantly over the past two decades. Traditional

scholarship focused predominantly on the Arab-Israeli conflict, oil politics, and great power competition. However, the 2003 Iraq War, the 2011 Arab uprisings, and the growing regional influence of Iran have prompted a re-evaluation of established paradigms.

Early works by scholars such as Fouad Ajami and Bernard Lewis emphasized the role of ideology and historical memory in shaping regional alignments. More recent scholarship, including works by F. Gregory Gause and Marc Lynch, has highlighted the pragmatic nature of Arab foreign policies and the importance of regime survival considerations. The emerging literature on the Abraham Accords, while still limited, has tended to focus on either the diplomatic breakthrough aspect or the implications for the Palestinian question.

This study contributes to the literature by providing a comprehensive theoretical framework that integrates security studies, international relations theory, and area studies expertise. It builds on the work of scholars who have applied realist theories to Middle Eastern politics while adding empirical depth through detailed case studies and original analysis of recent developments.

The research also addresses gaps in the existing literature by examining the economic dimensions of the Accords, the role of emerging technologies in shaping security cooperation, and the long-term implications for regional governance structures. By bringing together perspectives from scholars across the Muslim world, the study offers

diverse viewpoints on this significant geopolitical development.

Historical Context: From Conflict to Cautious Cooperation

The path to the Abraham Accords has been long and曲折, marked by failed peace initiatives, periodic wars, and gradual confidence-building measures. The historical context is essential for understanding the significance of the current normalization agreements and the strategic calculations underlying them.

The period following the ۱۹۷۹ Iranian Revolution marked a crucial turning point in regional alignments. Iran's transition from a key US ally under the Shah to an Islamic republic committed to exporting its revolution created new threat perceptions among both Arab states and Israel. The Iran-Iraq War (۱۹۸۸-۱۹۸۰) further entrenched these divisions, with most Arab states supporting Iraq against the revolutionary Iranian regime.

The ۱۹۹۰s witnessed tentative steps toward Arab-Israeli reconciliation through the Madrid Conference (۱۹۹۱) and the Oslo Accords (۱۹۹۳). However, the collapse of the peace process in ۲۰۰۰ and the subsequent Second Intifada halted this progress. The ۲۰۰۶ Lebanon War between Israel and Hezbollah demonstrated Iran's growing proxy capabilities, while the ۲۰۱۱ Arab uprisings created power vacuums that Iran and its allies sought to exploit.

Throughout this period, unofficial security cooperation between Israel and certain Arab states gradually increased, particularly regarding intelligence sharing on common threats. The joint opposition to the Iran nuclear deal (JCPOA) in ۲۰۱۰ further aligned Israeli and Gulf Arab interests. The Abraham Accords thus represent the formalization of cooperation that had been developing covertly for years.

Case Studies: Diverse Motivations for Normalization

۲.۱ United Arab Emirates: Strategic Vision and Economic Diversification

The UAE's decision to normalize relations with Israel reflects a calculated strategy based on multiple considerations. As a global trading hub with ambitious economic diversification plans, the UAE sees technological cooperation with Israel as crucial for its post-oil future. The agreement has already yielded significant partnerships in artificial intelligence, financial technology, healthcare, and renewable energy.

Security considerations were equally important. The UAE faces direct threats from Iranian-backed Houthi forces in Yemen, who have launched missile and drone attacks against Emirati territory. Normalization with Israel provides access to advanced missile defense systems and intelligence capabilities that enhance the UAE's security posture. The F-۳۵ fighter jet deal, though complicated by

US concerns about maintaining Israel's Qualitative Military Edge, symbolizes the strategic depth of this new partnership.

The UAE's approach also reflects its broader foreign policy doctrine of pragmatic engagement and conflict resolution. By establishing formal relations with Israel, the UAE positions itself as a forward-looking regional leader capable of shaping rather than simply responding to regional developments.

٥,٢ Bahrain: Regional Dynamics and Domestic Considerations

Bahrain's normalization decision must be understood in the context of its special relationship with Saudi Arabia and its domestic political situation. As a close ally of Saudi Arabia, Bahrain's foreign policy often aligns with Riyadh's strategic calculations. The Saudi tacit approval of normalization, despite not formally joining the Accords itself, was likely a determining factor.

Domestically, Bahrain's Sunni-led government faces challenges from a Shia-majority population, which it perceives as potentially susceptible to Iranian influence. By aligning more closely with the US-Israeli axis, Bahrain seeks to strengthen its security guarantees and deter Iranian interference in its internal affairs. The establishment of the US Navy's Fifth Fleet headquarters in Bahrain already provides significant security assurance, and normalization with Israel enhances this protective umbrella.

Economic factors also played a role, as Bahrain seeks to attract investment and develop sectors where Israel has expertise, particularly in technology and innovation. The recent economic challenges facing Bahrain have increased the urgency of finding new economic partners and opportunities.

٥,٣ Sudan: Transition and International Rehabilitation

Sudan's inclusion in the Abraham Accords represents a unique case driven largely by the transitional government's desire for international legitimacy and economic relief. Following the ouster of Omar al-Bashir in ٢٠١٩, Sudan's new leadership sought to break from its pariah status and integrate into the international community.

The US offer to remove Sudan from the State Sponsors of Terrorism list in exchange for normalization with Israel provided a clear incentive for the cash-strapped government. This removal unlocked access to international financial institutions and debt relief, crucial for Sudan's economic recovery. The decision also aligned with the military's interest in improving relations with Western powers.

However, Sudan's normalization has faced significant domestic opposition, reflecting the continued popularity of the Palestinian cause among the Sudanese public. The fragile nature of Sudan's political transition adds uncertainty to the long-term sustainability of this agreement.

◦,ξ Morocco: Historical Ties and Western Sahara Recognition

Morocco's normalization agreement included a unique dimension: US recognition of Moroccan sovereignty over Western Sahara. This linkage illustrates the pragmatic deal-making underlying the Accords and the Trump administration's willingness to use diplomatic tools to achieve multiple objectives.

For Morocco, normalization provided international validation of its position on Western Sahara, a longstanding foreign policy priority. The agreement also strengthens Morocco's relationship with the United States and Israel, both important sources of security cooperation and economic investment. Morocco's existing Jewish community and historical ties with Israeli Jews of Moroccan descent provided a cultural foundation for normalization.

The economic components of the agreement include direct flights, economic cooperation agreements, and potential Israeli investment in Moroccan infrastructure and technology sectors. Like other signatories, Morocco balances these practical benefits against domestic sentiment sympathetic to the Palestinian cause.

Regional Implications: Shifting Security Architectures

The Abraham Accords have fundamentally altered the regional security architecture in several significant ways. First, they have created a de facto alliance system stretching from North Africa to the Gulf, with Israel as a central component. This alignment enhances intelligence sharing, military coordination, and diplomatic cooperation among participants.

Second, the Accords have institutionalized a strategic division between status quo powers aligned with the US and revisionist actors led by Iran. This bipolar structure replaces the more complex multipolar system that characterized the region following the Arab uprisings. The clarity of this division may reduce miscalculation but also increases the risk of direct confrontation between the blocs.

Third, the Accords have marginalised traditional Arab leadership institutions like the Arab League, where consensus-based decision-making has often hindered decisive action. Instead, smaller groupings of like-minded states are increasingly driving regional initiatives, reflecting a broader trend toward flexible unilateralism in Middle Eastern diplomacy.

The security implications extend beyond the immediate participants. Non-signatory states like Saudi Arabia, while not formally joining the Accords, have benefited from the strengthened anti-Iran coalition. Meanwhile, Iran and its allies have responded by deepening their own coordination and enhancing their asymmetric capabilities.

The Palestinian Question: Marginalization or Opportunity?

One of the most controversial aspects of the Abraham Accords is their impact on the Palestinian cause. Critics argue that the agreements have further marginalized the Palestinians by allowing Arab states to normalize relations with Israel without securing meaningful concessions on Palestinian rights or statehood.

The UAE has positioned its normalization as benefiting Palestinians by preventing Israeli annexation of parts of the West Bank, though this claim is disputed. The practical effect has been to reduce Arab leverage over Israel regarding the Palestinian issue, as Israel can now maintain relations with Arab states while continuing occupation and settlement expansion.

However, some analysts suggest that the new alignment could create opportunities for more pragmatic approaches to conflict resolution. By integrating Israel more fully into the region, the theory goes, Arab states may gain greater influence over Israeli policy in the long term. The economic development projects envisioned under the Accords could also include Palestinian territories, though this remains speculative.

The Palestinian leadership's response has been uniformly negative, viewing the Accords as a betrayal of longstanding Arab consensus. The fragmentation of Arab unity

on this issue represents a significant setback for Palestinian diplomatic efforts and may force a reevaluation of their strategy.

Economic Dimensions: Beyond Security Cooperation

While security concerns drove the Abraham Accords, economic cooperation has emerged as a significant component of the new relationships. The complementary economies of Israel and the Gulf states create natural opportunities for partnership in multiple sectors.

In technology and innovation, Israeli startups have found eager partners in Gulf sovereign wealth funds and investment companies. Joint ventures in artificial intelligence, cybersecurity, fintech, and agricultural technology are proliferating. The UAE's "Projects of the Future" initiative, which outlines economic priorities for the next decade, explicitly identifies partnership with Israel as a key component.

Energy cooperation represents another promising area. Israel's natural gas exports to Jordan and Egypt could be expanded to include Gulf partners, creating integrated regional energy markets. Cooperation on renewable energy, particularly solar power, aligns with both Israeli expertise and Gulf investment in energy transition.

Tourism and people-to-people exchanges have grown rapidly, with direct flights facilitating business travel, medical tourism,

and religious pilgrimage. The establishment of joint business councils and academic partnerships further institutionalizes these economic ties.

However, significant challenges remain, including regulatory differences, political risk, and the ongoing conflict with Palestinians which continues to affect international perception of these relationships.

International Reactions: Global Implications of Regional Alignment

The Abraham Accords have elicited varied responses from international powers, reflecting competing interests and strategic calculations. The United States, under both the Trump and Biden administrations, has strongly supported the agreements as enhancing regional stability and advancing US interests.

European reactions have been more mixed. While welcoming reduced Arab-Israeli tensions, European governments have expressed concern about the impact on the Palestinian cause and the potential for increased regional polarization. The EU continues to advocate for a two-state solution based on pre-1967 borders, a position increasingly at odds with the new regional reality.

Russia and China have viewed the Accords with suspicion, seeing them as reinforcing US influence in the region. Both powers have

sought to maintain relationships with all regional actors, including Iran, and may attempt to mediate between the competing blocs.

For other regions with Muslim majorities, particularly in Asia and Africa, the Accords have prompted reevaluation of their own positions on Arab-Israeli relations. The pragmatic approach of Gulf states has provided diplomatic cover for other Muslim-majority countries considering closer ties with Israel.

Theoretical Reassessment: Balance of Threat in Practice

The implementation of the Abraham Accords provides an excellent case study for assessing and potentially refining Balance of Threat theory. Several observations emerge from this case that contribute to theoretical discussions in international relations.

First, the case demonstrates that threat perception can indeed overcome ideological differences and historical enmities when the perceived threat reaches a certain threshold. The fact that Arab states have normalized relations with Israel despite the ongoing Palestinian conflict underscores the primacy of threat perception in alliance formation.

Second, the case highlights the importance of external powers in facilitating balancing behavior. US diplomacy and security guarantees were crucial enablers of the Accords, suggesting that balance of threat

dynamics operate within broader hierarchical international structures.

Third, the economic dimensions of the Accords suggest that Walt's framework might be enhanced by greater consideration of economic interdependence as both a motivation for and constraint on balancing behavior. The commercial aspects of the new relationships cannot be fully explained by threat perception alone.

Finally, the case illustrates how balancing behavior can itself alter threat perceptions, potentially creating security dilemmas. Iran's response to the Accords has included enhanced military preparations and closer coordination with allies, which may in turn increase threat perceptions among Accords signatories, creating an action-reaction cycle.

Future Scenarios: Pathways for Regional Development

Looking forward, several scenarios could unfold based on the new regional dynamics established by the Abraham Accords. In an optimistic scenario, the economic and security cooperation fostered by the Accords could create sufficient interdependence and trust to facilitate broader conflict resolution, including movement toward Israeli-Palestinian peace.

A pessimistic scenario would see the regional division hardening into a cold war-like standoff, with occasional hot conflicts between the blocs. In this scenario, the

Accords would contribute to regional polarization rather than stability.

A more likely middle scenario involves continued pragmatic cooperation on specific issues alongside ongoing competition in others. The regional architecture may evolve toward issue-based alignments rather than comprehensive alliances, with states cooperating on economic matters while competing for influence in other domains.

The future of the Accords also depends on internal developments within key states. Leadership changes, particularly in Israel and the United States, could alter the commitment to implementing the agreements. Domestic opposition in Arab signatory states, while currently manageable, could grow if the economic benefits fail to materialize or if Israeli policies toward Palestinians become more aggressive.

Conclusion: The New Normal in Middle Eastern Politics

The Abraham Accords represent a watershed moment in Middle Eastern politics, signaling the emergence of a new regional order based on pragmatic security and economic calculations rather than ideological solidarity. This transformation has been driven primarily by shared threat perceptions regarding Iran's regional ambitions, perfectly illustrating Stephen Walt's Balance of Threat theory in action.

While the Accords offer potential benefits in terms of economic cooperation and enhanced security coordination, they also create new challenges and risks. The marginalization of the Palestinian issue, the potential for regional bipolarization, and the action-reaction dynamics with Iran suggest that the Accords may have traded one set of conflicts for another.

The long-term sustainability of the new alignments will depend on their ability to deliver tangible benefits to participating populations, manage relations with non-signatory states, and navigate the complex interplay of regional and great power competitions. What is clear is that the Middle East has entered a new era where traditional animosities are being re-evaluated in light of emerging threats and opportunities.

Future research should continue to monitor the implementation of the Accords, their impact on regional governance structures, and their interaction with other significant trends, including climate change, water scarcity, and demographic shifts. The Abraham Accords have opened a new chapter in Middle Eastern international relations, one that will likely be characterized by both unprecedented cooperation and novel forms of conflict.

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