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The Abraham Accords and Israel–UAE normalization

Shaping a new Middle East

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Summary

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- The normalization of relations between Israel and the UAE under the September 2020 Abraham Accords brought together two ambitious regional states with shared threat perceptions. The accords heralded greater political, economic and regional security integration in the Middle East, and after decades of discreet engagement between Israel and Gulf Arab states, have since led to high-level open diplomatic ties, commercial opportunities, technology transfers and dialogue on regional security.
 - The war in Ukraine should not distract from the diplomatic opportunities and challenges evident in the Middle East. To have a long-term transformative impact on Middle East regional security, consistent bipartisan support and institutional backing from current and future US administrations – together with the steady support of allies – are needed to secure broader leadership buy-in and shepherd security discussions.
 - The role of the US amid shifts in its security priorities has been a key driver of the Abraham Accords. As the long-time guarantor of regional security, US deprioritization of the Middle East in favour of focusing on geopolitical tensions with Russia and China has fuelled insecurity among the US's regional partners.
 - Relations between Israel and the UAE have evolved quickly since the signing of the Abraham Accords, particularly through economic and soft and hard power exchanges. Normalization has offered short- and long-term benefits to both countries, individually and collectively, evidenced in their enhanced international and regional standing, economic synergies and strategic opportunities.
 - Normalization has helped foster increased levels of regional engagement, conflict de-escalation and diplomatic reconciliation, seen through an array of bilateral and multilateral initiatives such as the Baghdad summits, the March 2022 Negev summit and the Israel–Lebanon Maritime Agreement. The CENTCOM-led objective of creating an integrated regional security construct has meanwhile mapped out an incremental process that could build trust and defence cooperation around the region.
 - Despite these gains, relations between Israel and the UAE are beset by an array of political, cultural and regional challenges that will require time, engagement and diplomatic attention to address. These challenges range from differing political systems, to tactical divides over managing the threat from Iran and the lack of progress on Palestinian issues. Divergences on Iran and the Palestinian Territories will not derail the accords, but could complicate and limit Israeli–Emirati cooperation – at least in public. Moreover, those divergences could prevent expansion of the accords, which is an important goal for Israel's foreign policy.

01

Introduction

This introductory chapter identifies and evaluates the factors that led Israel and the UAE to sign the Abraham Accords in 2020, examines the complex role of the US in the process of normalization and considers the accords' wider implications for regional dynamics.

In September 2020, normalization agreements known as the Abraham Accords were signed at the White House, formalizing ties between Israel and Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). At a time of deep regional insecurity stemming from tensions between the US and Iran,¹ the accords brought together US regional partners with shared threat perceptions concerning both the destabilizing influence of radical Islamist groups and Iran's regional activities. The agreements formalized relations after more than a decade of quiet Israeli–Emirati engagement amid shared concerns about declining US regional security commitments, mutual ambitions to directly manage and assert influence in multiplying regional conflicts, and a desire to forge stronger, regional economic ties.

At the outset, the Abraham Accords were not overtly directed towards security interests. For Israel, normalization was largely seen as a way of ending its regional isolation and finally open pathways to regional integration. The UAE meanwhile sought to capitalize on economic linkages and to expand scientific and technological collaboration. Both countries had long cooperated behind the scenes, but they saw value in publicly declaring their relationship to solidify those interests and remain relevant to the US, other global influencers and the region. Two years on from the signing of the accords, this public partnership has created major changes in regional dynamics and economic and security alignments. If well-managed and maintained, the Abraham Accords will have important implications for regional security in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region.

¹ Byman, D. L. (2020), 'Trump's reckless Middle East policy has brought the US to the brink of war', Brookings Order from Chaos blog, 6 January 2020, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2020/01/06/trumps-reckless-middle-east-policy-has-brought-the-us-to-the-brink-of-war>.

Although still a work in progress, the changes resulting from the accords have been motivated by a shifting and competitive regional climate, tied to concerns over the declining US security role in the Middle East and the ongoing challenge of containing Iran’s regional influence. Russia’s war on Ukraine and broader geopolitical tensions between the US and its allies and Russia and China have enhanced the accords’ value, causing Middle East regional powers to adopt flexible hedging strategies to protect against geopolitical competition and US withdrawal. This thought process has prompted the emergence of new groupings intended to bolster multilateral regional engagement. The Biden administration, despite initially viewing the Abraham Accords as an unwanted legacy of his predecessor, Donald Trump, has acknowledged that the accords do in fact serve US interests by enhancing regional cooperation in the Middle East.

Despite significant criticism from the outset, principally over the abandonment of Palestinian peace initiatives as a precondition to normalization with Israel,² normalization has enabled more open and integrative bilateral and multilateral discussions, aimed at fostering increased regional cooperation. A range of post-accords engagements have demonstrated this: not only the stronger bilateral economic ties between Israel and the UAE, but other minilateral and multilateral initiatives such as the August 2021 and December 2022 Baghdad summits, the March 2022 Negev summit, the East Mediterranean Gas Forum, the Israel–Lebanon maritime agreement and the Red Sea Council.³ The accords have also paved the way for the emerging regional security construct (RSC), backed and led by the US Central Command (CENTCOM). Should it come to fruition, the RSC will allow for gradual but greater regional security coordination and integration. Ultimately, the unprecedented level of engagement since the accords were signed could lead to a broader security initiative that would serve regional interests alongside those of the international community, and specifically those of the US.

Much consistent diplomatic work remains to be done to achieve such an outcome. Steady Western and regional engagement to balance divergent regional strategies among the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries will be necessary to manage growing challenges, ranging from Iran’s ongoing nuclear programme and regional activities, to the optical and political effects of the new Israeli ultra-right coalition government on normalized ties, and the lack of a Palestinian negotiation process. Above all, managing these challenges requires consistent diplomacy and trust-building among regional states that have previously struggled to maintain alliances. Direct and continued bipartisan US engagement to support bilateral and multilateral relationships can also help regional powers to achieve greater security integration.

Not since Jordan’s 1994 peace treaty with Israel had Arab states made steps of this magnitude, delinking normalization with Israel from progress on the conflict between Israel and the Palestinian Territories. This has been a noteworthy shift, bringing to light the prioritization of national and security interests, alongside a growing sense of detachment – particularly in some Gulf Arab states – towards the Palestinian leadership. As such, the Abraham Accords saw Israel solely commit

² Goldberg, J. (2020), ‘Iran and the Palestinians Lose Out in the Abraham Accords’, *The Atlantic*, 16 September 2020, <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/09/winners-losers/616364>.

³ The ‘I2U2’ group was also formed, comprising Israel, India, the US and the UAE.

to terminating its annexation plan of the West Bank without making further advances towards conflict resolution. Thus far, the accords have withstood pressure arising from two confrontations between Israel and Gaza and violence in the West Bank,⁴ which required mediation from regional states. This reflects the durability of the deal, and makes clear that both the UAE and Israel prioritize pragmatic national interests and benefits of normalization over the Palestinian conflict. However, without greater regional engagement on Palestinian security issues, states seeking to join the Abraham Accords could face a domestic popular backlash following further Israeli interventions in Gaza and the West Bank in early 2023.⁵

The Israeli and Emirati governments have placed greater emphasis on bilateral economic, technological and commercial opportunities in industries ranging from energy to tourism, and healthcare to ports, with the intent to build stronger trading links – both between themselves and within the region. Seeking to boost bilateral trade to \$4 billion within a five-year period, Israel and the UAE aim to enhance their domestic industries in the short term and achieve long-term economic sustainability through economic cooperation linking their economies to supply chains within and beyond the Middle East.⁶ Moreover, they intend to create stronger contact between their respective populations, which could further heal regional divides.

Beyond the important economic opportunities, the real value of the Abraham Accords lies in the tactical agreements and the larger strategic objectives of the partnership. Here, US support for normalization and continued regional security investments remain key to the ongoing success of the process.

Uncertainty over the US's regional security commitments – a sentiment shared by policymakers in both Israel and the UAE – was a significant motivator behind the accords. All parties are committed to 'join with the United States to develop and launch a 'Strategic Agenda for the Middle East' in order to expand regional diplomatic, trade, stability, and other cooperation'.⁷ Having relied on the US as the principal regional security guarantor for so long, regional states have been perturbed as the US seeks to shift its attention from the Middle East towards the Indo-Pacific.⁸ Three successive US administrations – those of Barack Obama, Donald Trump and Joe Biden – have sought to prioritize geopolitical competition with China and Russia, and to redirect US resources to this larger challenge after two decades of engagement in Afghanistan and Iraq. The impact of this shifting US posture, amid geopolitical challenges stemming from the war in Ukraine, is taking shape in the new Middle East.

⁴ Mathews, S. (2021), 'Despite Gaza bloodshed, few see Abraham Accords derailing', *Al Jazeera*, 21 May 2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/economy/2021/5/21/despite-gaza-bloodshed-few-see-abraham-accords-derailing>.

⁵ Berger, M. (2023), 'Jerusalem demolitions gain pace under Netanyahu, enraging Palestinians', *Washington Post*, 21 February 2023, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2023/02/21/jerusalem-home-demolitions-ben-gvir-netanyahu>.

⁶ Reuters (2020), 'Israel sees trade with UAE at \$4 billion a year', 7 September 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-uae-israel-economy-idUSKBN25Y14B>.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Council on Foreign Relations (2022), 'The U.S. Pivot to Asia and American Grand Strategy', project page, <https://www.cfr.org/project/us-pivot-asia-and-american-grand-strategy>.

About this paper

This paper seeks to evaluate how and why the Israeli–Emirati relationship – its strategic objectives, Israeli and UAE hard and soft power, and the economic aspect – has motivated greater regional cooperation and security integration. Our research provides a comprehensive examination of the economic, political and regional developments since the Abraham Accords were signed. Both Israel and the UAE seek a bigger regional role, economic interdependence and stronger, more stable ties with the US. Regional security integration is another long-term strategic objective for both countries. The US role in these investments and developments is important for the broader security dimensions.

For Israel, normalization agreements with Bahrain, Morocco and Sudan have been significant outcomes in themselves. However, our research has identified the Israel–UAE relationship as an important catalyst for regional security change. That relationship is based on a shared security posture, economic and soft power benefits, as well as broader regional objectives. While Israeli–Emirati ties are still developing, our data indicate that economic and security ties, alongside regional multilateral engagement, are creating a foundation for regional cooperation among other US-aligned states.

The paper assesses the history, motivations and dynamics of Israeli–Emirati normalization and its implications for regional security. The research highlights how the Abraham Accords and formalized ties between Israel and the UAE have created opportunities for the wider MENA region. Moreover, the US role in facilitating and supporting the relationship amid concerns of declining US regional influence and broader geopolitical competition is highly significant. The paper’s findings suggest that, despite continued frustration with the US among MENA countries, US engagement remains a key variable in the success of the accords and subsequent processes.

Yet for a more secure outcome to be achieved, a series of emerging regional and geopolitical challenges will also require sustained attention. Specific focus will be given to developments in Iran, the Palestinian Territories, Turkey, Saudi Arabia and intra-GCC dynamics.

The findings are based on desk research, key informant interviews and workshop discussions conducted under the Chatham House Rule with analysts and policymakers in Israel and the UAE, as well as in Europe, Iran, Jordan, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, the UK and the US. The interviewees’ identities have been anonymized for security purposes.

The paper begins with a brief review of the geopolitical and regional history, including the US’s involvement, that led to normalization. Chapter 3 assesses both states’ security landscapes, threat perceptions and regional priorities. Chapter 4 showcases the bilateral hard and soft power exchanges between Israel and the UAE since the Abraham Accords. Chapter 5 includes a detailed account of Israeli–Emirati economic relations. Chapter 6 discusses the changing regional security landscape and emergent multilateral groupings, while ongoing challenges and recommendations for leveraging the Abraham Accords are set out in Chapter 7.

02 Israel–UAE rapprochement leading to the Abraham Accords

Over the preceding 15 years, significant changes in the international and regional contexts – specifically US activity – enabled Israel and the UAE to deepen cooperation, culminating in the Abraham Accords.

The Abraham Accords were the culmination of a long process that saw Israel and the UAE’s core interests begin to align, over an extended period. As one interviewee noted: ‘the accords [didn’t] come out of [a] vacuum. It [was the] culmination of 10–15 years of tacit relations between [the] UAE and Israel. It has been evolving and there was a lot of dealing and exchange of views, benefits but it was never official, [though] everyone knew about it’.⁹

The accords made official this long-observed, quiet collaboration between Israel and Gulf Arab states that had been under way since the 1990s. There had not been a uniform GCC policy or approach to Israel. Rather, engagement was bilateral and premised on each GCC state’s own domestic and regional calculations.¹⁰ Incremental changes in the region allowed GCC states to gradually engage with Israel.

⁹ Remarks made during a roundtable discussion held under the Chatham House Rule, 17 November 2021.

¹⁰ Rahman, O. (2021), *The emergence of GCC-Israel relations in a changing Middle East*, Policy Note, Doha: Brookings Doha Center, <https://www.brookings.edu/research/the-emergence-of-gcc-israel-relations-in-a-changing-middle-east>.

The US influence

The Middle East’s strategic significance to the US has been in decline. Since the Obama administration, addressing domestic economic inequities and renewing America’s global economic position have taken precedence. After the onset of President George W. Bush’s costly ‘global war on terror’,¹¹ the global financial crisis in 2008, growing federal debt¹² and military de-escalation abroad, the US is refocusing on the home front alongside meeting the larger threat coming from China. Donald Trump’s presidency carried forward similar themes and stressed ‘America First’ and ‘burden-sharing’¹³ as a necessary precondition to US international engagement, including in the Middle East.¹⁴

Ideological contests in the MENA region between secular authoritarian models of governance and political Islamist ones continue, though space for freedom of expression has been closed in almost every state in the region.

Since the 2003 Iraq war and the 2011 Arab Spring, the Middle East region has been mired in conflict, which has been exacerbated by multipolar regional competition.¹⁵ In Iraq, US post-war investment since 2003 has yet to yield a stable government or stem the tide of extremism. US efforts at containment of, or engagement with, Iran have failed to halt the latter’s support for proxy groups in countries beyond its borders – such as in Iraq, Lebanon, Syria and Yemen.¹⁶ Ideological contests in the MENA region between secular authoritarian and political Islamist models of governance continue, though space for freedom of expression has been closed in almost every state in the region.¹⁷ Despite patterns of coercion and disregard for human rights, protest movements have gained ground and galvanized popular support outside the region. But wars in Libya, Syria and Yemen continue with no end in sight.

Trump’s 2018 withdrawal from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) over Iran’s nuclear programme and imposition of ‘maximum pressure’ sanctions led Iran to further undermine stability in the region. Iranian action was not

¹¹ Tisdall, S. (2021), ‘Lives lost, poverty, an arms race, rights destroyed ... the continuing cost of 9/11’, *Guardian*, 12 September 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2021/sep/12/lives-lost-poverty-an-arms-race-rights-destroyed-the-continuing-cost-of-911>.

¹² Rappeport, A. and Tankersley, J. (2022), ‘U.S. National Debt Tops \$31 Trillion for First Time’, *New York Times*, 4 October 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/10/04/business/national-debt.html>.

¹³ Holland, S. and Wroughton, L. (2019), ‘Trump says NATO countries’ burden-sharing improving, wants more’, *Reuters*, 2 April 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-nato-trump-idUSKCN1RE23P>.

¹⁴ Kaye, D. D. et al. (2021), *Reimagining U.S. Strategy in the Middle East: Sustainable Partnerships, Strategic Investments*, research report, Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, <https://doi.org/10.7249/RR958-1>.

¹⁵ Tol, G. and Dumke, D. (2019), *Aspiring Powers, Regional Rivals: Turkey, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the New Middle East*, Washington DC: Middle East Institute, 16 December 2019, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/aspiring-powers-regional-rivals-turkey-egypt-saudi-arabia-and-new-middle-east>.

¹⁶ Levitt, M. (2021), *Hezbollah’s Regional Activities in Support of Iran’s Proxy Networks*, paper, Washington DC: Middle East Institute, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/hezbollahs-regional-activities-support-irans-proxy-networks>.

¹⁷ Fakir, I. and Yerkes, S. (2018), ‘Governance and the Future of the Arab World’, in Bahout, J. et al. (2021), *Arab Horizons: Pitfalls and Pathways to Renewal*, report, Washington DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2018/10/16/governance-and-future-of-arab-world-pub-77501>.

met with a bold US response.¹⁸ The US did not immediately push back against Iran's June 2019 downing of a US drone, attacks on tankers in the Persian Gulf or a missile attack on Saudi oil facilities in September 2019, which the US blamed on Iran but was actually launched by the al-Houthis in Yemen.¹⁹ This anxiety intensified with the US withdrawal from Afghanistan in August 2021, which was seen in the region as proof of the US's abandonment of its partners. US focus on the war in Ukraine over regional challenges related to Iranian influence since early 2022 has only increased concerns that the MENA region is no longer a US priority.

Despite denials from the US,²⁰ MENA states have reacted to the combination of regional instability and uncertainty over the US position by shifting their own tactics towards de-escalation of regional conflict on the one hand and hedging against US disengagement on the other. US allies in the region, particularly Israel and the UAE, have found themselves frustrated by the shifts and unpredictability of US policy. Securing a stable long-term, security-based relationship with the US is a primary motivation for both states, and considered key for short-term and longer-term regional security management. The Abraham Accords provide a platform for such an arrangement.

Quiet beginnings

After the 1991 Madrid Peace Conference, Oman and Qatar were the first GCC states to engage overtly with Israel, through invitations for official visits and the opening of reciprocal trade offices.²¹ Saudi Arabia's 2002 Arab Peace Initiative (API) was also an important turning point,²² making Israeli normalization contingent on an overall peace with the Palestinians and the establishment of a Palestinian state. The initiative, announced at the Arab League summit in Beirut, marked a significant departure from the League's earlier 1967 resolution at Khartoum, which contained the 'three nos' against peace, recognition and negotiation with Israel.²³ The 1991 Madrid Peace Conference and the API opened the door to both formal and informal talks between Israel and Gulf Arab states, though for the most part, these remained behind closed doors.

The succession of younger leaders in the GCC has brought to the fore a more open generation that is willing to support efforts at moderating attitudes towards Israel.²⁴ As one interlocutor put it:

¹⁸ Lynch, C. (2020), 'Iran: Maximum Pressure, Minimum Gain', *Foreign Policy*, 23 December 2020, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/12/23/iran-maximum-pressure-trump-policy>.

¹⁹ Hubbard, B., Karasz, P. and Reed, S. (2019), 'Two Major Saudi Oil Installations Hit by Drone Strike, and U.S. Blames Iran', *New York Times*, 14 September 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/09/14/world/middleeast/saudi-arabia-refineries-drone-attack.html>.

²⁰ Barron, R. et al. (2022), 'Five Takeaways from Biden's Visit to the Middle East', United States Institute for Peace, 21 July 2022, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2022/07/five-takeaways-bidens-visit-middle-east>.

²¹ Judd, E. (2018), 'Six major events in Oman-Israel relations: Timeline', *Al-Arabiya*, 17 August 2018, <https://english.alarabiya.net/News/gulf/2020/08/17/Six-Oman-Israel-public-meetings-A-brief-history>;

and Mathews, S. (2022), 'Israeli military officials sent to Qatar as US works to bolster security cooperation', *Middle East Eye*, 8 July 2022, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/qatar-israel-military-officials-dispatched-amid-us-efforts-bolster-security>.

²² *Guardian* (2002), 'Arab peace initiative: full text', 28 March 2002, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2002/mar/28/israel7>.

²³ Lillian Goldman Law Library (1967), 'The Khartoum Resolutions; September 1, 1967', https://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/khartoum.asp.

²⁴ Remarks made during a roundtable discussion held under the Chatham House Rule, November 2022.

Much of what we've seen has been made possible by the level of confidence in the UAE leadership and particularly that surrounding MbZ [UAE president Muhammad bin Zayed Al Nahyan]. It's fair to say that Abu Dhabi leadership are aware that this policy adventure may not have 100 per cent of citizens fully on board. That's not to say that anyone would openly disagree but some may be doubtful – older generations were brought up with images of Palestine and coverage of Al Jazeera. I recall some very strong opinions on Israel and anti-Semitic too and I encountered maps on the wall that didn't show Israel properly either but that changed quite rapidly.²⁵

Leadership matters

Normalizing relations with Israel may not have been a priority for the UAE leadership, but their decision to lift certain restrictions on relations helped change the domestic environment and made cooperating with Israel possible. The changes included permitting Emirati businesses to engage with Israeli companies²⁶ – in effect, breaking the Arab League boycott of Israeli products.

Israeli officials had long sought recognition from Gulf Arab states. After Benjamin Netanyahu became Prime Minister again in 2009, he made clear his desire to meet with senior officials from Gulf Arab states to discuss regional security matters. However, the assassination in Dubai, in January 2010, of Hamas senior commander Mahmoud al-Mabhouh – attributed by the Dubai authorities to the Israeli external intelligence agency, Mossad²⁷ – put back the prospect of a meeting between senior leaders for another two years.²⁸

The nature of Israeli–Emirati relations started to change once the Arab Spring took hold and Syria's president, Bashar al-Assad, crossed Obama's so-called 'red line' on the use of chemical weapons,²⁹ though few signs of a public Israel–UAE relationship were yet visible. In September 2012, for instance, UAE foreign minister Abdullah bin Zayed Al Nahyan (AbZ) met the Israeli prime minister in New York. During that meeting, AbZ and Netanyahu agreed on the level of threat from Iran's nuclear programme, but AbZ made clear that there could be no public acknowledgment of this realignment without progress on the Palestinian issue.³⁰ Nevertheless, the meeting proved instrumental in facilitating further private meetings between senior Israeli and Emirati officials, and in the acknowledgment of Iran as a shared and constant concern.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Lisbona, N. (2022), 'Israel's fast-growing trade ties with the UAE', BBC News, 29 September 2022, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-63045930>.

²⁷ Lewis, P., Borger, J. and McCarthy, R. (2010), 'Dubai murder: fake identities, disguised faces and a clinical assassination', *Guardian*, 16 February 2010, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2010/feb/16/dubai-murder-fake-identities-hamas>.

²⁸ Ravid, B. (2017), 'Exclusive: Netanyahu Secretly Met with UAE Foreign Minister in 2012 in New York', *Haaretz*, 25 July 2017, <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/2017-07-25/ty-article/netanyahu-secretly-met-with-uae-foreign-minister-in-2012-in-new-york/0000017f-f5d4-d47e-a37f-fdfce3a30000>.

²⁹ Kessler, G. (2013), 'President Obama and the 'red line' on Syria's chemical weapons', *Washington Post*, 6 September 2013, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/fact-checker/wp/2013/09/06/president-obama-and-the-red-line-on-syrias-chemical-weapons>.

³⁰ Ravid (2017), 'Exclusive: Netanyahu Secretly Met with UAE Foreign Minister in 2012 in New York'.

The signing of the JCPOA in 2015 between Iran and the P5 + 1 group comprising China, France, Germany, Russia, the UK and the US drew similar public and private responses from Israel and the UAE. Both were alarmed by the development, as neither believed that the JCPOA addressed their own core security interests.³¹

Israel was not against a deal in principle, but objected strongly to the terms of the JCPOA, which it did not consider stringent enough. The government believed that the plan was insufficient to stop Iran advancing quickly towards break-out capability, and that it had effectively legitimized Iran's bid to become a threshold state.³² In Israel's view, neither the conditions, nor the sunset clauses were enough to prevent an Iranian bomb. However, some senior Israeli officials had, at the time, different opinions and publicly supported the JCPOA.³³

Similarly, the UAE felt that it had been betrayed by its main security partner – the US – as it had not been consulted during the process or involved in the negotiations.³⁴ Conversations with serving and former officials from signatory countries suggest that this was not, in fact, the case. Many of those interviewed for this paper describe in detail how Gulf Arab countries were frequently consulted. Nevertheless, there remains a strong perception among Emirati policymakers that their interests were not considered. As such, the UAE began a quiet campaign to undermine the JCPOA and highlight how it strengthened, rather than loosened, Iran's position in the region. This campaign took the form of public diplomacy in Washington, DC and other capitals, and active political and diplomatic lobbying.³⁵

Meanwhile, meetings between Israeli and Emirati officials intensified. In 2015, Israeli ambassador to the US Ron Dermer briefed the UAE ambassador to the US, Yousef al-Otaiba, and sought to convince him to align with Israel's position and actively oppose the deal. Israel had undertaken a public campaign against the JCPOA, and in March 2015 Israeli prime minister Netanyahu accepted an invitation to speak before a joint session of Congress, stating clearly that '[t]his is a bad deal – a very bad deal'.³⁶ Although the UAE chose to lodge its opposition to the agreement in private, Netanyahu's presentation to Congress proved to be a turning point in Israel–UAE relations.

Towards the end of Obama's second term as president, US intelligence agencies learned of phone calls between senior Israeli and UAE officials, including direct calls between Netanyahu and a senior Emirati leader. Intelligence agencies also reported that senior leaders of the two countries had met secretly in Cyprus

³¹ Ulrichsen, K. C. (2016), *Israel and The Arab Gulf States: Drivers and Directions of Change*, Rice University Baker Institute for Public Policy, September 2016, <https://docslib.org/doc/12521982/israel-and-the-arab-gulf-states-drivers-and-directions-of-change>.

³² Williams, D. and Irish J. (2015), 'Cutting losses on Iran nuclear deal, Israel eyes small print,' Reuters, 26 March 2015, <https://www.reuters.com/article/nuclear-iran-israel-idINKBNOMM29X20150326>.

³³ Kaye, D. D. (2016), 'Israel's Iran Policies After the Nuclear Deal,' perspective paper, Santa Monica, CA: Rand Corporation, <https://doi.org/10.7249/PE207>.

³⁴ Salisbury, P. (2020), *Risk Perception and Appetite in UAE Foreign and National Security Policy*, Research Paper, London: Royal Institute of International Affairs, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2020/07/risk-perception-and-appetite-uae-foreign-and-national-security-policy-0/5-assessing-uae>.

³⁵ Clifton, E. (2022), 'Gulf States Ran Highly Active D.C. Foreign Influence Operation Targeting Iran's IRGC', *The Intercept*, 16 May 2022, <https://theintercept.com/2022/05/16/saudi-uae-iran-irgc-lobbying>.

³⁶ Zezima, K. (2015), 'Netanyahu warns that nuclear deal 'paves Iran's path' to a bomb', *Washington Post*, 3 March 2015, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-politics/wp/2015/03/03/in-much-anticipated-speech-netanyahu-to-address-congress-tuesday>.

to discuss plans to counter the Iran nuclear deal. According to a former US State Department official, however, neither the Israelis nor the Emiratis informed the Obama administration of these discussions.³⁷

The Arab Spring and the JCPOA had, in effect, brought into sharp focus how similar Israeli and Emirati interests had become. However, it was the Palestinian issue that pushed them towards formalizing their relationship. Former Israeli foreign minister Tzipi Livni's presence at a lunch held in honour of AbZ in New York in September 2016 indicated improving relations between leading personalities. Over lunch, AbZ was reported to have told Livni that other Gulf Arab states were eager to improve relations with Israel, but none of them, including the UAE, would consider normalization unless Israel also took concrete steps towards a two-state solution with the Palestinians.³⁸ Nevertheless, it was Netanyahu's election victory in March 2020 and his pledge to annex parts of the West Bank that galvanized the UAE into action, leading to the Abraham Accords.

The Arab Spring and the JCPOA had, in effect, brought into sharp focus how similar Israeli and Emirati interests had become. However, it was the Palestinian issue that pushed them towards formalizing their relationship.

On taking office, Netanyahu declared his intent to annex approximately one-third of the West Bank. On 28 April 2020, he set a hard deadline of 10 weeks and signalled clearly that annexation would take place on 1 July.³⁹ According to an interviewee, Netanyahu likely believed that, because of his relationship with Trump and US ambassador to Israel David Friedman, the US would give its blessing or at least would not put up much resistance. Moreover, Trump's 'Deal of the Century', which failed almost immediately,⁴⁰ had given rise to an environment in which Netanyahu could push for things that had previously been unthinkable. However, the UAE leadership viewed annexation as a grave threat to regional stability that would empower Iran and political Islamists across the region.

In response to Netanyahu's pledge, al-Otaiba published an article in Hebrew in Israeli newspaper *Yedioth Ahronoth*, writing that informal relations between Israel and the Arab world had warmed over recent years. But he also warned against plans to annex parts of the West Bank and argued that such an action would damage the prospect of Israel's normalization with the Arab world.⁴¹ It was a groundbreaking move and al-Otaiba made the UAE position clear – annexation would end the relationship.

³⁷ Entous, A. (2018), 'Donald Trump's New World Order', *New Yorker*, 11 June 2018, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2018/06/18/donald-trumps-new-world-order>.

³⁸ Ravid (2017), 'Exclusive: Netanyahu Secretly Met with UAE Foreign Minister in 2012 in New York'.

³⁹ Reuters (2020), 'Netanyahu 'confident' U.S. will allow West Bank annexation in two months', 26 April 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-israel-palestinians-usa-idUSKCN2280NQ>.

⁴⁰ Tharoor, I. (2020), 'Trump's 'deal of the century' is no deal at all', *Washington Post*, 28 January 2020, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2020/01/28/trumps-deal-century-is-no-deal-all>.

⁴¹ Al Otaiba, Y. (2020), 'Annexation will be a serious setback for better relations with the Arab world', *Ynetnews*, 12 June 2020, <https://www.ynetnews.com/article/H1Gu1ceTL>.

Al-Otaiba had first mooted the idea of normalization between the UAE and Israel in March 2019 during a meeting with Trump’s senior adviser and Middle East envoy, Jared Kushner. The US had been supportive at the time, but Israel’s domestic political environment made normalization seem implausible – indeed, three general elections were held in the following 12 months, each resulting in neither main bloc holding a parliamentary majority. By March 2020, however, Netanyahu’s threat of annexation prompted Kushner and al-Otaiba to consider offering normalization to stop the Israeli prime minister from fulfilling his electoral pledge.⁴² Bilateral discussions took place between the US and UAE and the US and Israel, as the Emiratis wanted to ensure that Israel’s commitment would rest with the US and, therefore, be harder to renege on.

Although Trump was neither the architect nor the instigator of the Abraham Accords, his presidency created an environment in which the signatory states were able to challenge the status quo. Trump’s penchant for grand gestures gave Israel and the UAE a world stage to signal their intent to normalize relations and work out the details afterwards. It is revealing that both parties not only needed the endorsement of the US, but wanted it to play a leading role.

Biden’s regional response

On taking office in January 2021, Biden inherited these troubling regional dynamics and a disconnect between intentions and actions. Moreover, for months after coming into office, his administration was preoccupied with the fallout of the transition from Trump’s term in office.⁴³ The extreme polarization of US politics further impacted policy decisions on the Middle East. Despite promising to reverse Trump’s withdrawal from the JCPOA, the incoming Biden team took months to return to the negotiating table. In Washington, Biden’s team prioritized domestic politics and delayed development of their approach to Iran. The June 2021 Iranian presidential election, which saw Ebrahim Raisi elected, also resulted in a similar delay.

During their first year of office, the Biden team also refused to refer to the Abraham Accords by name, because of Trump’s role in brokering the deal.⁴⁴ To distance himself from Trump and his administration’s close ties to the GCC, Biden approached Gulf politics and particularly relations with Saudi Arabia’s crown prince Muhammad bin Salman Al Saud (MbS) tentatively. However, after the one-year anniversary of the accords, Biden began to see normalization as a durable opportunity, acknowledging that a new regional landscape was being formed among US partners.⁴⁵ The arrangements and relationships under way were also considered beneficial for the US’s broader global objectives. The US National Security Strategy (NSS)

⁴² Ravid, B. (2021), *Trump’s Peace: The Abraham Accords and the Reshaping of the Middle East*, Rishon LeZion: Yedioth Books.

⁴³ Liptak, K. and Zeleny, J. (2022), ‘The January 6 riot and Donald Trump loom over Joe Biden’s presidency a year later’, CNN, 6 January 2022, <https://edition.cnn.com/2022/01/05/politics/biden-presidency-jan-6/index.html>.

⁴⁴ Ferziger, J. H. (2021), ‘On Abraham Accords Anniversary, Biden Is Tepid About Israeli-Arab Peace’, *Foreign Policy*, 10 September 2021, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/09/10/biden-israel-uae-bahrain-abraham-peace-trump-kushner>.

⁴⁵ Starr, J. E. (2022), ‘Biden’s Trip, and Ukraine’s War, Could Boost the Abraham Accords’, United States Institute for Peace, 12 July 2022, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2022/07/bidens-trip-and-ukraines-war-could-boost-abraham-accords>.

released in October 2022 anchors the US position to a ‘new framework for US policy in the region based on America’s unparalleled comparative advantage in building partnerships, coalitions, and alliances to strengthen deterrence, while using diplomacy to de-escalate tensions, reduce risks of new conflicts, and set a long-term foundation for stability’.⁴⁶ The NSS makes clear that, notwithstanding geopolitical priorities with China and Russia, the US intends to continue to have a presence in the MENA region. Moreover, the strategy aims to create a deliberate role for the US through CENTCOM, while also being directed to empowering indigenous regional efforts that could over time secure longer-term security arrangements.

Despite the recalibration of US priorities, as outlined in the October 2022 National Security Strategy,⁴⁷ the challenge for Washington is that it has, since the end of the Cold War, been the principal guarantor of regional stability in the Middle East.⁴⁸ The Gulf Arab states, Israel, Egypt and Jordan have relied on close ties with the US to contain Iran, combat extremism and protect energy flows from the region. As US interests have begun to gradually shift, unwinding this dependency has proven challenging both for US policymakers and regional leaders.⁴⁹

⁴⁶ The White House (2022), *National Security Strategy*, October 2022, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Biden-Harris-Administrations-National-Security-Strategy-10.2022.pdf>.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Pollack, K. M. (2015), ‘Testimony: U.S. policy toward a turbulent Middle East’, transcript, Brookings Institution, 24 March 2015, <https://www.brookings.edu/testimonies/u-s-policy-toward-a-turbulent-middle-east>.

⁴⁹ Baharoon, M. (2022), ‘UAE-US Relations: What Went Wrong?’, blog, Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington, 22 April 2022, <https://agsiw.org/uae-u-s-relations-what-went-wrong>.

03

The security landscape

The Abraham Accords have enabled Israel and the UAE to address shared interests – security landscapes, threat perceptions and regional priorities – more effectively, both within the MENA region and with partners.

To fully appreciate the opportunities and challenges presented by Israeli–Emirati normalization, it is important first to identify the motivations of each state. As detailed below, there are many instances where the interests of both states align, which means that the prospects for a healthy partnership are good. As one interviewee observed:

If you set aside the issue of identity, there are a surprising number of similarities between the two countries. Both are small states with high degrees of inward migration that spend the highest proportion of their gross domestic product (GDP) on research and development, so collaboration affords opportunities to leverage their high-tech sectors. Both are reliant on the US but, because of their continued frustration and asymmetries, have been hedging their bets by building alliances with India, China and Russia to give them some leverage and independence from Washington.⁵⁰

The UAE’s motivations and concerns

For a state like the UAE with bold ambitions to become a major player in regional security – as shown by patterns of increased interventionism in recent years; for example, in Libya, Syria, Yemen and the Horn of Africa – cooperating with Israel

⁵⁰ Remarks made during a roundtable discussion held under the Chatham House Rule, 17 November 2021.

provides it with a strong security partnership. It also offers important optical, hard power, and commercial and technological benefits essential for its own national security strategy.

Unlike its GCC neighbours, the UAE has adopted a more flexible posture on external relations, as it seeks to proactively pursue regional and global opportunities. Under the leadership of MbZ, who acceded to the presidency in May 2022 after the passing of Sheikh Khalifa bin Zayed Al Nayhan, the UAE has developed a national security strategy⁵¹ that seeks to enhance its protection and stability through interlinked policies designed to promote economic openness, social development, religious tolerance and regional security through reliance on partnerships.⁵² Normalization then serves the UAE by strengthening regional economic linkages. As argued by one interviewee: the ‘Abraham Accords ticks those boxes for the UAE, helping the country build independent capacity through interdependence with the US and Israel’.⁵³

The UAE’s geography places it between regional heavyweights Iran and Saudi Arabia and makes it vulnerable to the impact of radical Islamism. The challenge of a relatively small population compared to those two countries has prompted the Emirati leadership to invest in bolstering its conventional defence capabilities and attracting a large foreign workforce. The UAE sees wider collaboration as necessary to nurture religious moderation in Saudi Arabia, while also constraining Qatar’s support for political Islamist groups like the Muslim Brotherhood. Strong security partnerships are also considered necessary to contain growing threats from Iran and Turkey, two regional disruptors who support state and non-state actors and seek to challenge the stability of status quo powers. Diverse regional and international relationships have helped the UAE contend with these constraints. Such moves are also tied to the UAE’s larger economic agenda of expanding trade links by ‘gaining control of sea routes from the Gulf of Aden to the Red Sea’.⁵⁴

The UAE has traditionally channelled its regional strategy via the GCC. Founded in 1981, this organization provided a coordinated structure to manage threats during both the Iran–Iraq war and the 1990 Gulf war. However, the GCC failed to alleviate bilateral tensions or enable greater integration. As such, the UAE since 2011 has taken a more robust approach to managing regional challenges ranging from Iran to the Muslim Brotherhood. This strategy has been led by MbZ, who regards any political Islamist vision – whether those of the Islamic Republic of Iran, the Muslim Brotherhood or the extremist ideas of Al-Qaeda and Islamic State (ISIS) – as a threat to the security and stability of the UAE.

As Peter Salisbury explained in his 2020 research paper, *Risk Perception and Appetite in UAE Foreign and National Security Policy*:

⁵¹ UAE Cabinet (2020), ‘Mohammed bin Rashid Launches ‘UAE Strategy for the Future’, <https://uaecabinet.ae/en/details/news/mohammed-bin-rashid-launches-uae-strategy-for-the-future>.

⁵² Ibish, H. (2017), *The UAE’s Evolving National Security Strategy*, paper, Washington DC: Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington, 6 April 2017, <https://agsiw.org/uaes-evolving-national-security-strategy>.

⁵³ Interview, 7 November 2022.

⁵⁴ Steinberg, G. (2020), *Regional power United Arab Emirates: Abu Dhabi is no longer Saudi Arabia’s junior partner*, Research Paper No. 10/2020, Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, <https://www.swp-berlin.org/10.18449/2020RP10>.

The ‘UAE model’ integrates economic openness, strong governance and service delivery, and a relatively secular and liberal (for the region) social environment, combined with a closed political system that polices speech and is built around an entrenched security state. Just as important is a rejection of any political or religious ideology that might challenge the supremacy of the state and its leaders.⁵⁵

To protect this ‘UAE model’, the Emirati government has taken a bolder but adaptive regional approach to push back against perceived transnational and regional threats.

The UAE sees Qatar not only as an ambitious competitor for prestige and influence, but also a sponsor, particularly since 2011, of Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated groups across the MENA region.

Regional and ideological competition with neighbouring Qatar has been an important pillar of Emirati foreign policy relevant to the Abraham Accords. The UAE sees Qatar not only as an ambitious competitor for prestige and influence, but also a sponsor, particularly since 2011, of Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated groups across the MENA region. The 2017 blockade of Qatar, imposed by the UAE alongside Bahrain, Egypt and Saudi Arabia, sought to compel Qatar to accept demands including the revocation of Doha-based broadcaster Al Jazeera’s operating licence, the downgrading of Qatar’s ties with Iran and closing Turkey’s military base in the country.⁵⁶ Rather than forcing any change in Qatari policy, the blockade conversely prompted Qatar to strengthen its ties with Iran and Turkey. The Saudi-led 2021 Al-Ula agreement formally brought intra-GCC tensions to an end, but Bahrain and the UAE have yet to resume full diplomatic ties with Qatar. Progress has been made since the death of Sheikh Khalifa, with observers suggesting the exchange of ambassadors could take place in the first half of 2023. Privately, though, Emiratis and Qataris acknowledge both that regional competition between the two states will continue and that the ideological divide will perpetuate mistrust and likely spark further disagreements in the future.⁵⁷

Stemming the tide of Islamist radicalism not only serves the UAE’s domestic security needs but also promotes its ‘secular governance’ model. As part of this strategy, the UAE has sought to cultivate religious moderation in Saudi Arabia, resulting in closer coordination between the two countries on regional campaigns, particularly those in Bahrain, Qatar and Yemen. Moreover, the UAE leadership has

⁵⁵ Salisbury (2020), *Risk Perception and Appetite in UAE Foreign and National Security Policy*.

⁵⁶ Sly, L. (2018), ‘Princely feuds in the Persian Gulf thwart Trump’s efforts to resolve the Qatar dispute’, *Washington Post*, 13 May 2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/princely-feuds-in-the-persian-gulf-thwart-trumps-efforts-to-resolve-the-qatar-dispute/2018/05/13/7853cc88-39cf-11e8-af3c-2123715f78df_story.html.

⁵⁷ Ramani, S. (2021), ‘The Qatar Blockade Is Over, but the Gulf Crisis Lives On’, *Foreign Policy*, 27 January 2021, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/01/27/qatar-blockade-gcc-divisions-turkey-libya-palestine>.

strongly endorsed Saudi crown prince and prime minister MbS, supporting his social, religious and economic reforms and seeing his leadership as a moderating influence on religious extremism that is beneficial to the region as a whole.⁵⁸

This relationship is not without its difficulties, though. Having embraced MbS and his agenda, the UAE sought to distance itself after the killing of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi. Both countries share the view that Iran remains a primary regional threat but have pursued different approaches. They also have demonstrated competing agendas in Yemen, which became apparent after the 2019 Emirati withdrawal from the war.⁵⁹ Furthermore, their differences inside OPEC+ over baselines and production has given rise to tensions and led to speculation that the UAE will follow Qatar's example in the near future and leave OPEC.⁶⁰ Divergences over resolving the Qatar rift have seen the UAE initially obstruct resolution to the crisis.⁶¹ Differences with Saudi Arabia and Qatar shed light on the political dissonance within the GCC, alongside growing trends of economic competition. These differences should at the same time not be conflated, as Saudi–Emirati regional security coordination continues to trump tactical divides.

Iran, particularly since the 1979 Iranian revolution, has been seen as a perpetual threat to the UAE and is the biggest security challenge for the state. Lacking the tools to directly manage Iranian pressure, the UAE has maintained a cautious hedging policy *vis-à-vis* Iran that has long been seen as a strategic challenge. In 1971, Iran seized three Emirati islands in the Persian Gulf, instigating a long-standing and still unresolved territorial dispute with Iran. While it remained neutral during the 1980–88 Iran–Iraq war, the UAE felt vulnerable to potential attack amid Iranian calls to export the Islamic revolution, owing to the UAE's relatively small size and proximity. This sense of vulnerability increased during the 1990 Gulf war and again during the 2003 Iraq war. The Arab Spring protests from 2011 heightened concerns still further, particularly those around Iranian interference in Bahrain's uprising. Al-Otaiba captured these anxieties in 2010, stating: 'Our military, who has existed for the past 40 years, wake up, dream, breathe, eat, sleep the Iranian threat'.⁶²

Revelations regarding Iran's nuclear programme since 2002, coupled with the growth of the Iranian proxy network in Iraq, Lebanon, Syria and Yemen, have only confirmed Emirati suspicions of Iran's regional ambitions. The 2015 JCPOA was criticized by the UAE leadership, which accused signatories of inadequately consulting with regional leaders or addressing what the UAE sees as Iran's malign regional interference. Because of these concerns, the UAE supported Trump's JCPOA withdrawal and sanctions-based 'maximum pressure' campaign that was designed to force Iran into giving further concessions. Instead of follow-

⁵⁸ Donaghy, R. (2016), 'Revealed: The UAE-backed plan to make young Saudi prince a king', *Middle East Eye*, 30 June 2016, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/revealed-uae-backed-plan-make-young-saudi-prince-king>.

⁵⁹ McKernan, B. (2020), 'Clashing UAE and Saudi interests are keeping the Yemen conflict alive', *Guardian*, 26 March 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/26/clashing-uae-and-saudi-interests-are-keeping-the-yemen-conflict-alive>.

⁶⁰ Quilliam, N. (2021), 'OPEC faces longer-term challenges', Chatham House Expert Comment, 16 August 2021, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2021/08/opec-faces-longer-term-challenges>.

⁶¹ Calabrese, J. (2022), 'The "New Normal" in Saudi-UAE Relations – Tying China In', Middle East Institute, 3 February 2022, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/new-normal-saudi-uae-relations-tying-china>.

⁶² Goldberg, J. (2020), 'UAE's Ambassador Endorses an American Strike on Iran', *The Atlantic*, 6 July 2010, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2010/07/uaes-ambassador-endorses-an-american-strike-on-iran-contd/59257>.

on negotiations, though, in the summer of 2019, Iran began its own ‘maximum resistance’ campaign that saw tankers seized, a US drone shot down and Saudi oil facilities attacked.

To manage these heightened tensions, which impacted negatively on the Emirati economy, the UAE called for de-escalation and began its own outreach to Iran, including via visits led by Emirati national security adviser Tahnoun bin Zayed Al Nahyan.⁶³ Those discussions with Iran have led the UAE to quietly distance itself from anti-JCPOA rhetoric, as well as offering investment in the Iranian economy. Such incentives, however, did not stop the January 2022 Houthi attacks that directly hit airport facilities in Abu Dhabi,⁶⁴ demonstrating to the Emirati leadership and its allies both Iran’s regional reach and its limited capacity to thwart such attacks by proxy groups.

The strikes on Abu Dhabi were described by Emirati leaders as the ‘UAE’s 9/11’.⁶⁵ When the Biden administration did not respond with immediate condemnation of the attacks, the UAE made its deepening frustration public.⁶⁶ Tensions flared through the outbreak of war in Ukraine, when Emirati leaders did not immediately condemn Russian aggression, choosing to remain neutral. This approach was not well received in the US. Here, Israel served as an interlocutor.⁶⁷ But the crisis was only averted when Biden and Secretary of State Antony Blinken engaged directly with the UAE.⁶⁸ What ensued was further investment in bilateral dialogue directed towards achieving a long-term US–UAE strategic agreement that, when concluded, intends to define the contours of a ‘longer, stronger relationship’.⁶⁹

Rapprochement between Iran and the UAE also slowed as the Emirati leadership sought to recalibrate. A planned visit to the UAE by Iranian president Raisi was called off.⁷⁰ After the March 2022 ceasefire in Yemen, marking an important turning point in the war, relations tentatively improved again.⁷¹ By August 2022, the UAE had agreed to return its ambassador to Tehran, showcasing that tactical hedging remains the best short-term method for managing tensions with Iran.⁷² This decision, as articulated by Emirati political analyst Abdulkhaleq Abdulla, comes after a decade of tension and four years of outreach. Abdulla reflects that the new way forward is premised on the belief that ‘[in] continu[ing] the

⁶³ Hafezi, P. (2020), ‘UAE security official pays rare visit to Iran to discuss ties, regional issues’, Reuters, 6 December 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-iran-emirates-idAFKBN2ILOME>.

⁶⁴ Cornwell, A. (2022), ‘UAE says missiles, drones used in deadly Houthi attack, some intercepted’, Reuters, 20 January 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/uae-says-missiles-drones-used-attack-some-intercepted-2022-01-20>.

⁶⁵ Interview, 4 February 2022.

⁶⁶ Ravid, B. (2022), ‘UAE abstained from UN Security Council vote due to U.S. response to Houthi attacks’, Axios, 2 March 2022, <https://www.axios.com/2022/03/02/uae-security-council-russia-vote-us-houthi-attacks>.

⁶⁷ Ravid, B. (2022), ‘U.S. enlisted Israel to lobby UAE to condemn Russian invasion’, Axios, 3 March 2022, <https://www.axios.com/2022/03/03/israel-lobbied-uae-un-resolution-condemn-russia>.

⁶⁸ Aboudouh, A. (2022), ‘Russia’s war in Ukraine is making Saudi Arabia and the UAE rethink how they deal with US pressure over China’, Atlantic Council MENASource blog, 26 April 2022, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/the-ukraine-war-is-making-saudi-arabia-and-the-uae-rethink-how-they-deal-with-us-pressure-over-china>.

⁶⁹ Interview, 8 November 2022.

⁷⁰ Chulov, M. (2022), ‘Suspected drone attack in Abu Dhabi kills three and raises tensions’, *Guardian*, 17 January 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/jan/17/drones-explosions-three-oil-tankers-airport-abu-dhabi>.

⁷¹ Almosawa, S. and Hubbard, B. (2022), ‘Warring Parties in Yemen Announce Overlapping Cease-Fires’, *New York Times*, 30 March 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/30/world/middleeast/yemen-houthis-saudi-coalition-cease-fire.html>.

⁷² Reuters (2022), ‘UAE, upgrading ties with Iran, says envoy to return to Tehran within days’, 21 August 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/uae-ambassador-iran-resume-duties-coming-days-foreign-ministry-2022-08-21>.

conversation and find[ing] common ground for good neighbourly relations. The ball is in Iran's court. The UAE is testing Iran's intentions and closely monitoring its behaviour'.⁷³ However, de-escalation should not be misconstrued as a change in its assessment of Iran's destabilizing role. Rather, as one policymaker stated, 'the UAE is acutely aware that confrontation does not serve Emirati economic and security interests'.⁷⁴

Since the Arab Spring, close collaboration and strategic cooperation with the US have enabled the UAE to be more regionally assertive. The UAE has the second highest military expenditure in the Middle East after Saudi Arabia, with a defence budget of over \$19.8 billion in 2020 or 5.6 per cent of its GDP.⁷⁵ It has been a partner to every US military mission in the Middle East since 1991 and in operations against ISIS, and is seen by US officials as the most reliable Arab ally in the Middle East.⁷⁶ Former US secretary of defence Jim Mattis referred to the UAE as 'Little Sparta',⁷⁷ in reflection of the country's investment in defence, single-minded military ambition and outsized role in regional security stability. Emirati activism has been seen in prominent operations in Afghanistan, the Horn of Africa, Libya and Yemen.⁷⁸

Close collaboration and strategic cooperation with the US have since the Arab Spring enabled the UAE to be more regionally assertive.

At the same time, differences that have emerged over the past decade with successive US administrations' approaches to the region have exacerbated tensions between the US and UAE. For Emirati leaders, the cooling of relations began during the Obama presidency. The pendulum swung in the opposite direction during Trump's tenure. President Trump not only visited the Gulf, but sought also to reforge ties with Israel, the UAE and Saudi Arabia, providing assurances and hard-hitting anti-Iran policy. However, Trump's signalling was not matched with action. He continued to elevate geopolitical tensions with China over managing regional challenges in the Middle East, and made calls for burden-sharing among Western allies.⁷⁹ His administration struggled to manage the 2017 Qatar crisis and, because of regional competition among Gulf states, failed to advance the collective security objective known as the Middle East Strategic Alliance

⁷³ Abdulla, A. (2022), 'The UAE-Iran diplomatic reset is part of a greater focus on regional stability', *The National*, 24 August 2022, <https://www.thenationalnews.com/opinion/comment/2022/08/24/a-new-chapter-in-iran-uae-relations>.

⁷⁴ Interview, 7 November 2022.

⁷⁵ Jo, H. (2021), 'Can the UAE emerge as a leading global defense supplier?', *Defense News*, 15 February 2021, <https://www.defensenews.com/digital-show-dailies/index/2021/02/15/can-the-uae-emerge-as-a-leading-global-defense-supplier>.

⁷⁶ Pollack, K. M. (2020), *Sizing up Little Sparta: Understanding UAE Military Effectiveness*, Report, Washington, DC: American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research, <https://www.aei.org/research-products/report/sizing-up-little-sparta-understanding-uae-military-effectiveness>.

⁷⁷ Chandrasekaran, R. (2014), 'In the UAE, the United States has a quiet, potent ally nicknamed 'Little Sparta'', *Washington Post*, 9 November 2014, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/in-the-uae-the-united-states-has-a-quiet-potent-ally-nicknamed-little-sparta/2014/11/08/3fc6a50c-643a-11e4-836c-83bc4f26eb67_story.html.

⁷⁸ Salisbury (2020), *Risk Perception and Appetite in UAE Foreign and National Security Policy*.

⁷⁹ Gould, J. and Mehta, A. (2020), 'Trump wants NATO to be more involved in the Middle East. That may take some convincing', *Defense News*, 8 January 2020, <https://www.defensenews.com/smr/nato-2020-defined/2020/01/08/trump-wants-nato-to-be-more-involved-in-the-middle-east-that-may-take-some-convincing>.

(MESA).⁸⁰ The Trump administration also saw the UAE’s commercial ties with China – amid rumours of a Chinese military facility near Abu Dhabi’s port and the UAE’s use of Huawei 5G telecommunications technology, seen as a threat to data security – as a potential challenge.⁸¹

In a polarized domestic and international climate, the Abraham Accords are considered by many to be the Trump administration’s most significant foreign policy achievement. The impact of partisan politics made the Biden administration reluctant to champion the accords. As explained above, the Biden team only came around to the agreement after the first anniversary, recognizing the opportunity the accords presented for greater multilateral cooperation in the Middle East. Since then, Biden has consistently signalled his support for regional multilateral initiatives. In advance of his trip to the region in July 2022, Biden stated: ‘Part of the purpose – the trip to the Middle East – is to deepen Israel’s integration into the region, which I think we’re going to be able to do – which is good for peace, and good for Israeli security’.⁸²

Israel’s strategic landscape

For Israel, normalization with the UAE has been hailed as an important achievement that addresses three key areas: ending its regional isolation, bolstering its relationship with the US and managing its larger regional security concerns.⁸³ After two decades of stalled peace efforts and the incremental building of ties, via the Abraham Accords, Israel has gained important recognition from a third and fourth Arab state without having made progress on Palestinian statehood – the accords having formally ended pan-Arab unity on that subject. The accords have also broken decisively with Israel’s ‘periphery doctrine’ that saw it ally with non-Muslim countries to counter pan-Arab unity, confirming that Netanyahu’s vision of ‘peace through strength’ will be a precondition for any future Israeli–Arab negotiations.⁸⁴ Indeed, Netanyahu has stated that: ‘We believe in alliances born out of Israel’s value as a technological, financial, defence, and intelligence powerhouse’.⁸⁵ More importantly, Israel now benefits from having a partner (in the UAE) that sees cross-regional threats in the same light, ultimately giving Israel an opportunity to achieve greater integration in the Middle East.

Above all, Israel’s strategy is oriented towards the US. Despite the historical nature of the Israeli–US relationship, ties have frayed with growing criticism coming from the Democratic Party. While appearing positive on the surface, bipartisan relations

⁸⁰ Helou, A. (2019), ‘Trump’s ‘Arab NATO’ withers on the vine’, *Defense News*, 15 February 2019,

<https://www.defensenews.com/digital-show-dailies/index/2019/02/15/trumps-arab-nato-withers-on-the-vine>.
⁸¹ Lubold, G. and Strobel, W. P. (2021), ‘Secret Chinese Port Project in Persian Gulf Rattles U.S. Relations With U.A.E.’, *Wall Street Journal*, 19 November 2021, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/us-china-uae-military-11637274224>.

⁸² Pettypiece, S. (2022), ‘What to watch for during President Biden’s trip to the Middle East’, NBC News, 12 July 2022, <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/white-house/watch-president-bidens-trip-middle-east-rcna37572>.

⁸³ Black, I. (2019), *Just below the surface: Israel, the Arab Gulf States and the limits of cooperation*, Report, London: Middle East Centre, The London School of Economics and Political Science, <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/100313>.

⁸⁴ Norlen, T. and Sinai, T. (2020), *The Abraham Accords – Paradigm Shift or Realpolitik?*, *Security Insights Number 064*, Garmisch-Partenkirchen: The George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies, <https://www.marshallcenter.org/en/publications/security-insights/abraham-accords-paradigm-shift-or-realpolitik>.

⁸⁵ *Times of Israel* (2018), ‘PM said seeking to formalize relations with Saudi Arabia before next election’, 8 December 2018, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/pm-said-seeking-to-formalize-relations-with-saudi-arabi-before-next-election>.

were damaged under the Trump administration with the pursuit of the lopsided ‘Deal of the Century’. Netanyahu’s policy on annexation of territory in the West Bank also drew much criticism among younger generations in the US. The accords offered an important opportunity to improve bipartisan relations. Having taken annexation off the table at the time, the Israeli government sought to rebalance relations.

Managing security concerns is another strategic pillar of the Abraham Accords for Israel. For decades, Iran and its regional power remained the principal foreign policy concern. Israeli policymakers have been preoccupied with Iran’s nuclear ambitions. But Iran’s growing political and military influence in the region (particularly in Gaza, Iraq, Lebanon and Syria), its expanding missile capacity and network of non-state militia partners surrounding Israel are seen as an existential threat.⁸⁶ In 2018, Israel began a strike campaign against Iran’s assets in Syria to counter its presence in that country.⁸⁷ Inflammatory Iranian rhetoric calling for ‘Israel to be wiped off the map’ further aggravates tensions.⁸⁸ Divergences have emerged within the Israeli security establishment and with the US over how to manage threats from Iran. Netanyahu saw Iran as a greater threat than challenges from the Palestinian leadership.⁸⁹ In this vein, he viewed Trump’s sanctions-based, ‘maximum pressure’ campaign as a productive strategy to reduce Iranian regional influence and force concessions on its nuclear programme.

While Israel coordinated closely with Trump on Iran strategy, Biden’s pledge to return to the JCPOA has raised Israeli fears that his team will repeat Obama’s strategy of ignoring Iran’s regional activities to focus on the JCPOA. The Israeli–Emirati axis has been in continued consultation with the Biden administration throughout the latest JCPOA negotiations. For Israel, the Abraham Accords present an opportunity to reverse Iran’s proxy-based forward defence strategy designed to project power closer to Israel’s borders, by bringing Israeli military capabilities and ‘Octopus’ strategy to the Persian Gulf.⁹⁰ Greater collaboration between Israel and the UAE could also help to manage Iran’s presence in Syria, which has so far been tactically constrained by intermittent Israeli targeting of Iranian facilities and networks in that country. Abu Dhabi’s lead in normalizing relations between Arab states and Damascus is in part aimed at pegging back Iranian influence and, if successful, would benefit both the UAE and Israel. Ultimately, both states seek to use their respective strategies to restrict and reduce Iranian influence over time.

⁸⁶ Freilich, C. (2008), ‘The United States, Israel, and Iran: Defusing an “Existential” Threat’, *Arms Control Today*, 5 November 2008, <https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2008-11/iran-nuclear-briefs/united-states-israel-iran-defusing-%E2%80%9Cexistential%E2%80%9D-threat>.

⁸⁷ Knell, Y. (2021), ‘Iran nuclear programme: Threat of Israeli strike grows’, *BBC News*, 23 November 2021, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-59322152>.

⁸⁸ MacAskill, E. and McGreal, C. (2005), ‘Israel should be wiped off map, says Iran’s president’, *Guardian*, 27 October 2005, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2005/oct/27/israel.iran>.

⁸⁹ Lipner, S. (2016), ‘Growing divergence in the U.S.-Israel relationship’, *Brookings Markaz blog*, 20 December 2016, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/markaz/2016/12/20/growing-divergence-in-the-u-s-israel-relationship>.

⁹⁰ Kaye, D. D. (2020), ‘An Israeli Escalation Against Iran?’, *The Rand blog*, 15 July 2020, <https://www.rand.org/blog/2020/07/an-israeli-escalation-against-iran.html>.

Since the Arab uprisings, Turkey has presented another growing regional challenge for Israel. Despite a history of diplomatic and military ties and a lucrative economic relationship, relations have soured under Recep Tayyip Erdogan’s leadership of Turkey.⁹¹ Turkey’s efforts to project its own political, economic, cultural and military power, spreading from the Mediterranean to the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean, have raised deep concerns in Israel. With a military presence in Iraq, Libya, Qatar and Syria, the development of its own network of proxy groups, political interests in Gaza and tensions over natural gas deposits in the Aegean Sea and eastern Mediterranean, Turkey’s forays in the wider Middle East and its support for Muslim Brotherhood groups in the region have been seen by Israel as destabilizing.⁹²

In this context, strategies for containing Turkish influence have also been employed. In 2018, Israeli–Turkish relations were downgraded following violence on the Gaza border and Turkish protests over the US decision to move its embassy to Jerusalem from Tel Aviv.⁹³ Israel has long seen Turkey to be an important balancer in its regional foreign policy. Turkey has had influence over Hamas and is seen in Israel as a bulwark against Iran’s regional activities in Azerbaijan, Iraq and Syria. As the Turkish economy has faltered and in advance of presidential and parliamentary elections in May 2023, outreach towards Turkey is seen as primarily tactical among Israeli policymakers.⁹⁴ As stated by one interviewee: ‘through Israel, Ankara can improve its ties with Washington and the Gulf Arab states and that is Erdogan’s first objective’.⁹⁵ Another interviewee reflected on the deep mistrust that exists in Israel towards Erdogan, stating: ‘[T]he relationship will not be seen to be stable or bring meaningful changes unless Erdogan fails to be re-elected’.⁹⁶ The tactical calibration under way should be seen as part of a broader Israeli strategy of regional integration, with the larger focus directed towards Iran.

The US withdrawal from Afghanistan

The US withdrawal from Afghanistan in October 2021 reinforced a commonly held view among the US’s regional partners that Washington could no longer be depended on to provide unequivocal support. In fact, it was the nature of the US departure, following a 20-year presence of US troops, that sent shockwaves across the Middle East and other regions. Chaotic scenes broadcast from Kabul airport symbolized regional partners’ fears that the US would abandon them, if it deemed that course of action necessary, with little concern for the consequences for its former

⁹¹ Randall, D. (2022), ‘Turkey and Israel: A Relationship Unlikely to be Fully Rekindled’, Foreign Policy Research Institute, 3 March 2022, <https://www.fpri.org/article/2022/03/turkey-and-israel-a-relationship-unlikely-to-be-fully-rekindled>.

⁹² Selmi, J. (2022), ‘Rebuilding Israeli-Turkish Relations: A Marriage of Convenience’, Fikra Forum Policy Analysis, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 26 May 2022, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/rebuilding-israeli-turkish-relations-marriage-convenience>.

⁹³ Cook, S. A. (2022), ‘How Israel and Turkey Benefit From Restoring Relations’, Council on Foreign Relations In Brief blog, 23 August 2022, <https://www.cfr.org/in-brief/how-israel-and-turkey-benefit-restoring-relations>.

⁹⁴ Interviews, 19 March–25 March 2022.

⁹⁵ Interview, 25 March 2022.

⁹⁶ Interview, 15 June 2022.

allies.⁹⁷ No matter how much the US administration sought to assure its regional partners that Washington remained committed to their security, the withdrawal from Afghanistan served only to compound well-established concerns that regional states could find themselves facing major threats alone.⁹⁸

The fact that it was the Biden administration, composed of internationalist Democrats, that conducted the departure – although the Trump administration had negotiated the terms and nature of withdrawal⁹⁹ – exacerbated fears among regional partners that US reprioritization was now a bipartisan agenda. Although the status of US–Israel and US–UAE relations are qualitatively different – with Israel enjoying much deeper, ideational, historical, technological, institutional and emotional ties – the Israeli and UAE leaderships understood that their relationship would become critical to managing regional security if the US downscaled its military presence and investment, and passed responsibility to regional states. This reading of the US withdrawal and its consequences further consolidated the Israeli–Emirati relationship, while giving a higher priority to the security and defence aspects of their partnership. And yet, both countries continue to share a desire to keep the US engaged in the Middle East.

Securing a stable and long-term, security-based relationship with the US is a primary driver for both Israel and the UAE and key for short-term and longer-term regional security management.

Securing a stable and long-term, security-based relationship with the US is a primary driver for both Israel and the UAE and important for short-term and longer-term regional security management. Following the 9/11 attacks, the UAE sought to strengthen its ties with the US, and under the careful management of MbZ, deepened intelligence, defence and security relations. At the same time, the UAE embassy in Washington, DC sought to emulate Israel's active and successful public diplomacy in the US. The UAE's leadership has long since viewed Israel's US relationship with both admiration and envy.

Neither state wants to be dependent on the US, but defence and security are critical features of their individual relationships. Despite its close relationship with the US, Israel has nearly always exercised a high degree of autonomy when pursuing its national security interests.¹⁰⁰ As such, it has often undertaken independent and sometimes pre-emptive military action, which has occasionally caused the US difficulty. However, such action has been prompted by Israel's own calculations as to what constitutes a direct existential threat to the country's national security.

⁹⁷ Gall, C. and Khapalwak, R. (2021), 'Chaos Ensues at Kabul Airport as Americans Abandon Afghanistan', *New York Times*, 16 August 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/08/16/world/asia/afghanistan-airport-evacuation-us-withdrawal.html>.

⁹⁸ Barhouma, M. (2021), 'The Reverberation of the American Withdrawal from Afghanistan in the Arabian Gulf', Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 17 September 2021, <https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/85367>.

⁹⁹ Phillips, A. (2021), 'Trump's deal with the Taliban, explained', *Washington Post*, 26 August 2021, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2021/08/20/trump-peace-deal-taliban/>.

¹⁰⁰ Fisher, M. (2022), 'As Israel's Dependence on U.S. Shrinks, So Does U.S. Leverage', *New York Times*, 24 March 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/05/24/world/middleeast/Israel-American-support.html>.

Any difficulties have not, however, harmed US–Israel relations at a strategic level. Consequently, Israeli and US officials enjoy a close working relationship, even if interactions are sometimes ‘robust’. As such, there can be little doubt that Israel wants to hold on to its significant margin of manoeuvre when it comes to taking unilateral action in the region, such as carrying out air strikes against targets in Gaza, Iran, Iraq and Syria. But this freedom also depends on the US maintaining a strong military presence and playing an active diplomatic role.

As noted above, one means of achieving Israel’s aim of retaining US backing is by redoubling efforts with the UAE to align public diplomacy campaigns in Washington, coordinating on regional security issues and deepening cooperation on pressing matters, such as energy, technology and investment.¹⁰¹

Since the Arab uprisings, the UAE has learned to emulate Israel’s approach of ‘act first and consult later’ and has done just that in Libya, Qatar and Yemen. In the case of Qatar, the UAE was instrumental in galvanizing Bahrain, Egypt and Saudi Arabia into implementing the June 2017 blockade,¹⁰² and the UAE’s actions effectively presented the US with a *fait accompli*, knowing full well that consultation may have forced them to adopt a less aggressive course of action. The UAE has also sought to follow Qatar’s example of projecting power across the wider MENA region, in the form of military, financial, diplomatic or political support to states or groups that share common interests – most notably, curtailing the influence of political Islam.

By asserting itself more forcibly than in the past – in one sense, responding to Obama’s call for regional states to share the burden of regional security,¹⁰³ the UAE has sent a clear message to the US that it is ready to take independent action when its material interests are at stake. But it has also sought to signal that a continued US presence in the region remains vital for the maintenance of the regional and global security orders. In essence, the UAE has bold long-term ambitions for regional power of its own but remains hampered by short-term security challenges that require continued US support.

The Abraham Accords therefore present a solution for both the US and for its regional allies, who share common security interests in countering terror threats and promoting regional stability. Bonded by shared and overlapping concerns – regarding Iran, Islamist extremism and mounting uncertainties about the future of US strategy – the partnership formalized by the accords has enabled Israel and the UAE to assert their mutual interests more effectively, both within the MENA region and in the US. This is best summarized by one interviewee who stated: ‘The relationships are about independence and interdependent capabilities, and about connecting the strategic and the economic in tandem with the US in a deliberate way’.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰¹ Bauer, K. (2022), ‘Israel-UAE Economic Cooperation Has Deep Roots and Broad Dividends’, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 8 March 2022, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/israel-uae-economic-cooperation-has-deep-roots-and-broad-dividends>.

¹⁰² Salisbury (2020), *Risk Perception and Appetite in UAE Foreign and National Security Policy*.

¹⁰³ Landler, M. (2016), ‘Obama Criticises the ‘Free Riders’ Among America’s Allies’, *New York Times*, 10 March 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/03/10/world/middleeast/obama-criticizes-the-free-riders-among-americas-allies.html>.

¹⁰⁴ Interview, 14 November 2022.

04

Hard and soft power synergies

Normalization offers short- and long-term benefits to Israel and the UAE, in terms of clear hard and soft power synergies, including in the areas of security and defence cooperation and technology investment.

Normalization has offered Israel and the UAE, both individually and collectively, a set of short- and long-term benefits that are demonstrated by their enhanced international and regional standing, economic links and domestically driven strategic opportunities.

Although the security benefits discussed in the Chapter 3 have been a primary goal for both Israel and the UAE, increasing soft power influence in the region and further afield has been another mutually beneficial outcome of the Abraham Accords, enhancing both countries' ability to manage shared issues and threats. As indicated by interviews with policymakers in Israel and the UAE, achieving longer-term regional security integration is the key objective for both states. But soft and hard power objectives are intertwined.

While these synergies are being publicly championed by both governments, the Israeli–Emirati relationship is beset by an array of political, cultural and regional challenges that will require time, engagement and diplomatic attention to address. These obstacles range from differing political systems to tactical divides in managing the strategic threat coming from Iran, and the lack of progress on the Palestinian Territories. Thus far, such challenges have not impeded the relationship, nor overtly obstructed the more fluid avenues of economic cooperation. But for the relationship to continue to flourish, these dynamics need to be acknowledged.

Hard power

Israel and the UAE are small states – geographically and demographically – situated in a complex and hostile environment. Both have built strong defence partnerships with the US, although Israel’s has been predicated on a threat made by regional states and non-state actors to erase it from the map. This is not the place to discuss the history of Israel’s founding, but since claiming independence in 1948, Israel has used hard power and diplomacy to secure its environment, expand its territory and manage territories that it occupies.¹⁰⁵ It has also maintained a distinctive qualitative edge over its regional rivals in military terms, given the durability of its strategic alliance with the US and its own high-tech capabilities. Although rivals have sought strategic parity with Israel, those countries have so far failed to achieve it.¹⁰⁶

The UAE is much more dependent on the US security umbrella than Israel, despite having established a diverse set of military relationships with other countries.

While Israel has proved itself to be effective in cultivating and using soft power, it has always placed a higher priority on hard power and has used this almost continuously since 1948. Despite reliance on the US for support, Israel has developed its own capability to manufacture arms and can deploy force independently. There have been many instances where Israel has acted pre-emptively against threats and justified them with US counterparts retrospectively, or has sought a White House ‘blessing’ in advance to carry out targeted strikes or launch operations. Examples include the targeting of Iraq’s Osirak facility in 1981;¹⁰⁷ or the assassination of Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps colonel Hassan Sayyad Khodaei in May 2022, although in the latter case Israel has so far declined to comment.¹⁰⁸

The UAE, meanwhile, has only invested in offensive hard power capability since 2001. Given the limitations of the UAE’s size, MbZ focused on cultivating an effective Special Forces capability that could first be deployed in support of US-led missions in the region covered by US Central Command (CENTCOM), including Afghanistan, and, later, in support of the UAE’s direct national interest in theatres of war, including in Libya and Yemen.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁵ Bickerton, I. J. and Klausner, C. L. (2022), *A History of the Arab–Israeli Conflict*, 9th edition, Abingdon: Routledge.

¹⁰⁶ Hinnebusch, R. (2017), ‘Revisiting the 1967 Arab–Israel War and its Consequences for the Regional System’, *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, 44(4), pp. 593–609, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13530194.2017.1360014>.

¹⁰⁷ Evans, A. (2017), ‘A Lesson from the 1981 Raid on Osirak’, Wilson Center, 10 July 2017, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/blog-post/lesson-the-1981-raid-osirak>.

¹⁰⁸ *Times of Israel* (2022), ‘Israel keeping US out of loop on alleged covert attacks in Iran – report’, 21 June 2022, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/israel-keeping-us-out-of-loop-on-alleged-covert-attacks-in-iran-report>.

¹⁰⁹ Ibish (2017), *The UAE’s Evolving National Security Strategy*.

The UAE is much more dependent on the US security umbrella than Israel, despite having established a diverse set of military relationships with other countries – most notably with France¹¹⁰ to lessen its dependency on one external actor. The depth of this dependency on the US – in terms of arms procurement, training, missile defence and basing rights – has left the UAE with little room to develop an independent capability like that of Israel or to purchase and deploy major weapons systems from alternative suppliers. However, since the Arab Spring, the UAE has been able to exercise a greater degree of operational autonomy and has attempted to emulate Israel, deploying forces first and then justifying their actions afterwards.

MbZ has become convinced that US security guarantees are more conditional than before the Arab Spring, as the US has placed a higher priority on its strategic competition with China. Consequently, the UAE has had to assume a greater burden in managing regional security. This has led it to deploy special forces and materiel in support of counter-revolutionary forces in the region without first seeking US consent.

For example, the UAE deployed forces in Libya from 2013 to support anti-Muslim Brotherhood forces, and in Yemen in 2015 in pursuit of anti-Islah national security and economic interests primarily in southern Yemen.¹¹¹ One interlocutor noted:

[T]he UAE, and Saudi, have a greater sense of assertion in the region particularly because of where the US is now, and where they are going to be in 3–4 years. So states realize they cannot wait for the US to decide everything, and they have to be more assertive themselves.¹¹²

Whether its disengagement from the region is real or imagined, the US is clearly fatigued from its recent interventions in the region.¹¹³ The diplomatic, financial and reputational costs of intervening in Afghanistan and Iraq, and of managing the region's security, have been extremely high.

Israel and the UAE are the only US partners in the Middle East with the capacity and the political will to carry out action independently, or even on behalf, of the US to protect their immediate national security interests.¹¹⁴ They are well-served by their investment in special forces, intelligence capabilities and technologies, and are militarily more versatile than their larger neighbours such as Egypt and Saudi Arabia.

The UAE's campaign in southern Yemen has been successful in securing its immediate interests by limiting its mission to training and equipping the Southern Transitional Council (STC)¹¹⁵ and curtailing the influence of Al-Qaeda. It has been less successful in Libya, however. The UAE leadership has proved adept at beating a tactical retreat and instead pursuing diplomatic channels to achieve its aims. Meanwhile, Israel

¹¹⁰ Indyk, M. (2004), 'US Policy Priorities in the Gulf: Challenges and Choices', in *International Interests in the Gulf Region*, Abu Dhabi, The Emirates Center for Strategic Studies and Research, <https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/20041231.pdf>.

¹¹¹ Steinberg (2020), 'Regional Power United Arab Emirates'.

¹¹² Roundtable discussion held under the Chatham House Rule, 17 November 2021.

¹¹³ Bertrand, N. and Seligman, L. (2021), 'Biden deprioritizes the Middle East', Politico, 22 February 2021, <https://www.politico.com/news/2021/02/22/biden-middle-east-foreign-policy-470589>.

¹¹⁴ Sharp, J. M. et al. (2020), *Israel's Qualitative Military Edge and Possible U.S. Arms Sales to the United Arab Emirates*, report, Congressional Research Service, 26 October 2020, <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/R/R46580>.

¹¹⁵ Middle East Eye (2019), 'Yemen war: Who is the Southern Transitional Council?', 30 August 2019, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/yemen-war-who-are-southern-transitional-council>.

has learned to live with instability and war in Syria, which has seen Iran acquire a greater degree of influence in that country. Nevertheless, Israel has set its own independent ‘red lines’ in Syria, which preclude Iran, Hezbollah or other Iran-aligned groups from establishing a presence along its border in the Golan Heights or moving advanced military materiel through to Lebanon.¹¹⁶ Israel has enforced these red lines and carried out air strikes at will against targets it categorizes as threats, in locations close to its borders, in eastern Syria and even in Iraq.^{117,118}

The two countries have demonstrated their capability and willingness to intervene militarily to either secure their immediate security interests or shore up stability in conflict states. In fact, the UAE has sought to help stabilize states in the Horn of Africa over the past decade.¹¹⁹ This makes them leading candidates to burden-share with the US.

Israel–UAE ties are complementary. The UAE is not a direct competitor with Israel in the region, and the two countries are now closely aligned in their approaches to the White House, Congress and elsewhere. This has tied their security interests together: both want the US to remain committed – militarily and diplomatically – to the region; but they are obliged to work together to ensure that the US stays engaged.

Israel–UAE security matters

Israeli and Emirati hard power benefits emanate from a sense of shared security challenges. They both enjoy a qualitative technical military edge – albeit asymmetrical in favour of Israel – over their common adversary in Iran, and face similar threats, namely from ballistic missiles, rockets, mortars, low-cost drones, naval mines and cyberattacks.¹²⁰ This edge has facilitated efforts to form a common front against Iranian threats, coordinate the two countries’ stance towards the US and lend political justification for new security arrangements. The formalization of the relationship in the Abraham Accords was accompanied by an initial agreement for the US to sell F-35 fighter planes to the UAE – a deal approved by Israel in consultation with the US as part of a principle of preserving Israel’s ‘qualitative military edge’.¹²¹

One such example was the Emirati navy holding its first ever joint military exercise with Israeli warships in the Red Sea in November 2021, coordinated by the US Fifth Fleet.¹²² This exercise set a precedent for collective policing at sea to counter weapons-smuggling and threats posed by pirates and the Iranian navy. However, participating in joint military exercises does not amount to the formation

¹¹⁶ The Institute for National Security Studies (2017), ‘Israel’s Red Lines on Iran’s Foothold in Syria’, INSS Insight No. 993, 22 November 2017, <https://www.inss.org.il/publication/israels-red-lines-irans-foothold-syria>.

¹¹⁷ Agence France Presse via *Guardian* (2022), ‘Israeli airstrike on Damascus airport kills five Syrian troops – reports’, 17 September 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/sep/17/israeli-airstrike-on-damascus-airport-kills-five-syrian-troops-reports>.

¹¹⁸ Magally, N. (2022), ‘Israel Destroyed Several Iranian Arms Convoys in Iraq’, *Asharq Al-Awsat*, 14 June 2022, <https://english.aawsat.com/home/article/3702051/israel-destroyed-several-iranian-arms-convoys-iraq>.

¹¹⁹ Quilliam, N. (2019), ‘Understanding Stability and Stabilisation: New actors in Stabilisation,’ in Gervais, V. and van Genugten, S. (eds), *Stabilizing the Contemporary Middle East and North Africa – Regional Actors and New Approaches*, London: Palgrave.

¹²⁰ GlobalData (2022), ‘Abraham Accords treaties continue to promote defence cooperation in the Middle East’, *Army Technology*, 24 August 2022, <https://www.army-technology.com/comment/abraham-accords-treaties-middle-east>.

¹²¹ Sharp et al. (2020), *Israel’s Qualitative Military Edge and Possible U.S. Arms Sales to the United Arab Emirates*.

¹²² Reuters (2021), ‘UAE, Bahrain, Israel and U.S. forces in first joint naval drill’, 11 November 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/uae-bahrain-israel-us-forces-conduct-red-sea-military-exercise-2021-11-11>.

of an alliance – multilateral or bilateral. To achieve that, Israel and the UAE would need to build trust and align strategic priorities and approaches to meeting regional threats. The relationship is far from that at present.

The issue of building trust is critical, and, although Israel and the UAE share security concerns, it will take time until they are able to form a durable partnership. At least two issues make gaining trust particularly difficult. First, Israel remains concerned that its unique cutting-edge technology will be shared, either deliberately or inadvertently, by the UAE with third parties.¹²³ (The US has similar concerns over the UAE sharing sensitive data with China.¹²⁴) Second, given their differing strategic priorities and the UAE's greater vulnerability to Iranian retaliation, the UAE will find it hard to trust Israel to take action that serves collective interests, rather than prioritizing its own immediate interest.¹²⁵ In other words, the UAE is concerned that it may bear the cost of any Israeli actions against Iran.¹²⁶ This vulnerability is fully understood by Iran, which will likely exploit it to try to drive a wedge between Israel and the UAE.

Nevertheless, the building blocks of a durable partnership between the countries' leaders are being put in place. These blocks may come to serve as a foundation for a nascent bilateral or multilateral security framework. The success of such a venture largely depends on two factors: (i) whether Israel's and the UAE's strategic priorities and approaches dovetail, which is contingent on Iran; and (ii) whether the US intends to maintain its engagement in the region.

As previously mentioned, Israel and the UAE's threat perceptions differ in some ways. Israel believes that an Iran in possession of nuclear weapons would pose a threat to its very existence. As such, the Iranian nuclear programme poses a far greater threat than the actions of its proxy groups elsewhere in the region.¹²⁷ Despite Hezbollah's presence across the Lebanese border and its armoury of 130,000 rockets bearing down on Israel's population centres, and regular wars with Hamas and Islamic Jihad in Gaza, Israel considers these threats to be of a lower order, and ones that it can manage effectively through technological advancements like the laser-based air defence system tested in April 2022.¹²⁸ Israel also ensures that Iran carries a high cost for its actions and makes clear that it is always willing to set and enforce red lines.

¹²³ Peck, M. (2020), 'Middle East Shocker: Israel May Sell Weapons To Arab Nations', *Forbes*, 3 September 2020, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/michaelpeck/2020/09/03/middle-east-shocker-israel-may-sell-weapons-to-arab-nations/?sh=5ea10db26f86>.

¹²⁴ Kerr, S. (2020), 'UAE caught between US and China as powers vie for influence in Gulf', *Financial Times*, 2 June 2020, <https://www.ft.com/content/1ff19ff-50bf-4b00-8519-520b8db2082b>.

¹²⁵ Jacobs, A. and Foucher, L. (2022), 'The myth of an emerging 'Mideast NATO'', *Responsible Statecraft*, 9 October 2022, <https://responsiblestatecraft.org/2022/10/09/the-myth-of-an-emerging-mideast-nato>.

¹²⁶ Interview, 4 May 2022.

¹²⁷ Vakil, S. and Quilliam, N. (2021), *Steps to enable a Middle East regional security process: Reviving the JCPOA, de-escalating conflict and building trust*, Research Paper, London: Royal Institute of International Affairs, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2021/04/steps-enable-middle-east-regional-security-process>.

¹²⁸ Fabian, E. (2022), 'In 'game changer,' Israeli laser-based air defense shoots down drones', *Times of Israel*, 14 April 2022, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/laser-based-air-defense-shoots-down-drones-rockets-in-first-series-of-trials>.

The UAE, meanwhile, considers Iran's proxy groups in Bahrain, Iraq, Lebanon, Syria and Yemen to be a greater threat than its attempts to develop a nuclear weapons capability. Houthi strikes against the UAE from Yemen, Iranian targeting of Emirati shipping in the Persian Gulf and missile strikes against Saudi Arabia's energy infrastructure have only reinforced that perception.¹²⁹

Both Israel and the UAE have recently been the targets of Iranian naval assaults in the Persian Gulf and the Red Sea. Vessels that are either directly owned by, or connected to, Israelis such as the *Lori* and *Mercer Street* have been attacked in 2021, while the *Pacific Zircon* was hit by a drone attack in November 2022. Meanwhile, four commercial vessels, from Norway, Saudi Arabia and the UAE, were sabotaged near Fujairah (one of the world's largest bunkering hubs) in May 2019. The US indicated that it believed Iranian operatives had attached limpet mines to the ships below the waterline.¹³⁰ Consequently, Israel Aerospace Industries (IAI) and UAE's EDGE Group started a joint project in November 2021 to design and produce unmanned surface vessels (USVs) capable of operating autonomously to carry out anti-submarine warfare, minesweeping, and intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR) operations. Abu Dhabi Ship Building oversees platform design and integration of control systems, while IAI develops the platform's autonomous control systems and mission payloads.¹³¹

The elevated threat posed by ballistic missiles since the start of the Yemen war has led the UAE to seek from Israel advanced missile defence systems and short-range air defence (SHORAD) systems. An Emirati request to acquire the Israeli Iron Dome and the David's Sling anti-ballistic missile defence system co-developed by US company Raytheon and Israel's Rafael Defence Technologies was turned down, however, for fear that the technology could be shared with other parties.¹³² In September 2022, Rafael Advanced Defence Systems agreed to sell the SPYDER (Surface-to-air Python and DERby) air defence system to the UAE to protect its airspace against attack aircraft, cruise missiles and drones.¹³³ The following month, Israel deployed a version of the Israeli-made Barak air defence system to the UAE.¹³⁴ Interviewees confirmed that further Emirati acquisitions of Israeli defensive equipment are likely, and regarded those acquisitions as key to upgrading the security dimensions of the relationship.

The UAE is eager to develop its ISR capabilities to combat Iranian drone technology, in which area the Israeli defence industry holds major technical expertise. The UAE has also sought to expand its deep-tech industry by investing

¹²⁹ Helou, A. (2022), 'Iran-backed attacks are further driving UAE-Israeli defense tech development', Defense News, 21 February 2022, <https://www.defensenews.com/global/mideast-africa/2022/02/21/iran-backed-attacks-are-further-driving-uae-israeli-defense-tech-development>.

¹³⁰ Yaakoubi, A. (2019), 'U.S. Navy says mine fragments, magnet point to Iran in Gulf tanker attack', Reuters, 19 June 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-mideast-attacks-navy-idUKKCN1TK1C3>.

¹³¹ Israel Aerospace Industries (2021), 'EDGE Announces Strategic Deal with IAI to Develop Advanced Unmanned Surface Vessels', press release, 18 November 2021, <https://www.iai.co.il/edge-strategic-deal-with-iai-unmanned-surface-vessels>.

¹³² Middle East Monitor (2022), 'Israel rejects selling Iron Dome defence system to UAE', 29 January 2022, <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20220129-israel-rejects-selling-iron-dome-defence-system-to-uae>.

¹³³ Cornwell, A. and J. Irish (2022), 'Exclusive: Israel to sell air defence system to United Arab Emirates', Reuters, 23 September 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/exclusive-israel-sell-air-defence-system-united-arab-emirates-sources-say-2022-09-22>.

¹³⁴ Egozi, A. (2022), 'First Israeli Barak Air Defense System Deploys to the UAE', Breaking Defense, 19 October 2022, <https://breakingdefense.com/2022/10/first-israeli-barak-air-defense-system-deploys-to-uae-bigger-deals-expected-sources>.

in advanced technologies, such as artificial intelligence (AI), machine-learning and cloud-networking, but has faced constraints given its limited domestic technical capabilities.¹³⁵ Cooperating with IAI, therefore, has enabled the UAE to realize its ambition while also aligning Israeli and Emirati security, technical and commercial interests.

The Abraham Accords have reinforced the UAE's position in the changing regional order and allowed it better to pursue its strategic interests. First, normalization has given it the political capital to work with Israel on persuading the US to remain engaged in regional security, despite the latter's priorities having shifted. Second, the accords have given the UAE access to a whole new range of security solutions that previously were unavailable to it. The UAE's desire to actively manage the region with Israel and the US, and to finance and market Israeli high-tech security projects, has led the UAE to re-evaluate its strategic priorities and approaches, though the path to doing so is long and winding.

The fear that the US may no longer be as committed as it once was to UAE and Gulf Arab security, and the concern that the capabilities of Iranian proxies are growing, will push the UAE into sharing similar strategic priorities with Israel. The Abraham Accords, therefore, provide a framework on which a regional security structure can be based, with Israel and the UAE serving as the key axes. But this framework will only be successful if the US remains invested and committed enough. The economic aspects of the accords, however, are less dependent on US support.

Soft power and reputational management

The Abraham Accords have an important soft power and reputational impact that aims to bolster Israel and the UAE's image and prestige, and to feed into regional narratives about their growing influence and joint objectives. The UAE's existing soft power projection is far more sophisticated than that of Israel, which has a much greater hard power capacity, although it is effective at influencing and lobbying to promote its objectives. Together, both states have derived benefits from the pooling of their resources to promote the economic opportunities arising from normalization, and enhance their regional and international relevance.

As described by Joseph Nye, soft power projection aims to advance a country's regional and international influence through appeal and attraction, rather than force and coercion.¹³⁶ Important markers of soft power range from public relations, education systems, technological innovation, progressive architecture, sporting achievements, religious tolerance, cultural appeal (including creative industries such as music and fashion), diplomatic networks and economic policy.

¹³⁵ GlobalData (2022), 'Abraham Accords treaties continue to promote defence cooperation in the Middle East'.

¹³⁶ Nye, J. S. (2004), *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics*, New York: Public Affairs.

Emirati soft power

For the UAE, soft power has been an important part of the country's national strategy of projecting Emirati influence as an enterprising and forward-looking state with a progressive domestic, economic and regional agenda.

The UAE has formally recognized soft power as a crucial policy tool. In September 2017, the UAE Soft Power Council launched the UAE Soft Power Strategy, which aims to increase the country's global reputation abroad by 'highlighting its identity, heritage, culture and contributions of the UAE to the world'.¹³⁷ On establishing the Soft Power Council, the UAE vice-president stated:

We want to develop a different strategy to introduce our culture and values to all people across the world. We want to utilise new tools and methods in order to reach more people, and share our knowledge, culture and history with the world.¹³⁸

In terms of indicators, the UAE ranks first in the Middle East region and 10th worldwide for 'influence' in the 2022 Brand Finance Global Soft Power Index (GSPI), and 15th overall in the GSPI rankings.^{139,140} In the ASDA'A BCW-sponsored Arab Youth Survey, the UAE has for 11 years running been ranked as the country that most young people want to live in.¹⁴¹ Both sets of indicators have been actively promoted by the UAE authorities.

The strongest element the UAE's soft power is the diversified economic model that provides a cornerstone of its security strategy, with Dubai positioned as an international gateway and the key business hub for the whole Middle East. This reputation is used to attract an international workforce to the country (with foreign residents outnumbering locals nine to one).¹⁴² Similarly, a progressive regulatory environment is demonstrated through strong international partnerships. The UAE continues to lead on ease of doing business indexes in the Arab world.¹⁴³ To stay ahead of regional competitors, the UAE has further liberalized the economic and social environment through policy shifts such as moving the official weekend to align with Western countries. Moreover, it has committed to liberalizing visa and residency laws to offer longer-term residency to certain categories of professionals and investors. The economic impact of COVID-19, in conjunction with regional tensions, has seen the UAE pivot away from its militaristic image as 'Little Sparta', instead promoting itself as 'Little Singapore'.¹⁴⁴

¹³⁷ UAE (2022), 'The UAE Soft Power Strategy', <https://u.ae/en/about-the-uae/strategies-initiatives-and-awards/strategies-plans-and-visions/strategies-plans-and-visions-until-2021/the-uae-soft-power-strategy>.

¹³⁸ Ibid.

¹³⁹ Brand Finance (2022), 'Global Soft Power Index', <https://brandirectory.com/softpower>.

¹⁴⁰ Oommen, A. (2022), 'UAE tops MENA, enters Top 10 for "influence" in Global Soft Power Index 2022', *Arabian Business*, 16 March 2022, <https://www.arabianbusiness.com/gcc/uae/uae-culture-society/uae-global-soft-power-index-2022>.

¹⁴¹ ASDA'A BCW (2022), *A White Paper on the findings of the 14th annual ASDA'A BCW Arab Youth Survey 2022*, https://arabyouthsurvey.com/wp-content/uploads/whitepaper/AYS-2022-WP_English-9022023-B-1-3.pdf.

¹⁴² UAE Government Portal (2022), 'Population and demographic mix', <https://u.ae/en/information-and-services/social-affairs/preserving-the-emirati-national-identity/population-and-demographic-mix>.

¹⁴³ Kamel, D. (2019), 'UAE aims to top World Bank's ease of doing business list in 2021', *The National*, 8 December 2019, <https://www.thenationalnews.com/business/economy/uae-aims-to-top-world-bank-s-ease-of-doing-business-list-in-2021-1.948495>.

¹⁴⁴ Ignatius, D. (2021), 'The UAE's Machiavellian journey from 'Little Sparta' to 'Little Singapore'', *The Washington Post*, 14 September 2021, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2021/09/14/uaes-machiavellian-journey-little-sparta-little-singapore>.

Another part of the UAE's soft power appeal is in its offer of a safe and stable environment. Its message of a religiously tolerant society that welcomes a plurality of faiths is further enhanced by the signing and implementation of the Abraham Accords. In an effort to demonstrate these values, the Abrahamic Family House opened in Abu Dhabi in February 2023. The building aims to promote inter-religious dialogue by bringing together a church, a mosque and a synagogue in one complex.¹⁴⁵

Foreign policy is a critical soft power tool for the UAE. As one of the first GCC states, alongside Bahrain, to normalize ties with Israel, the UAE seeks to cement its reputation as a country willing to 'disrupt the regional status quo and be willing to take risks'.¹⁴⁶ The UAE has gone so far as to host the Israeli leadership, with then prime minister Naftali Bennett becoming, in December 2021, the first Israeli leader to visit the UAE.¹⁴⁷ The UAE has sought to use financial aid to develop international relationships and enhance its image through public diplomacy, utilizing its significant resources to achieve both principled and pragmatic goals. The Abu Dhabi Fund for Development, established in 1971, has distributed over \$32 billion for development projects spanning 103 countries.¹⁴⁸

The Abraham Accords therefore fit neatly into the UAE's soft power narrative. For several interviewees, winning bipartisan support across the US political spectrum was a primary motivation behind the accords. Such support is regarded as important to cement the UAE's relationship with the US policy establishment. According to this view, after policy volatility between the Obama and Trump administrations, Israeli–Emirati normalization serves as a reminder to the Democratic and Republican parties – both of which are predominantly supportive of Israel – that the UAE is a reliable and long-term regional partner for the US. Because the accords saw Benjamin Netanyahu back away from annexation of the West Bank, one analyst saw normalization as additionally bolstering the UAE's image as a peacemaker and as an important new Arab interlocutor that could help manage future challenges regarding the Palestinian Territories.¹⁴⁹

Israeli soft power

Through different means, the Abraham Accords have also bolstered Israel's image and soft power. Israel had previously been less successful than the UAE in deploying its soft power. Regional hostility and security threats caused Israel to place greater emphasis on national security and hard power imperatives. However, Israel's military prowess and strength have some soft power dimensions that include promoting Israel as a successful defender of its security. This image has no doubt led to initial outreach and cooperation with the GCC states, which seek to emulate Israel's hard security

¹⁴⁵ *The National* (2023), 'UAE's Abrahamic Family House is a new home for an old tradition of tolerance', 20 February 2023, <https://www.thenationalnews.com/opinion/editorial/2023/02/20/uaes-abrahamic-family-house-is-a-new-home-for-an-old-tradition-of-tolerance>.

¹⁴⁶ Interview, 12 December 2021.

¹⁴⁷ Al Jazeera (2021), 'Israeli PM Naftali Bennett begins first official visit to UAE', 12 December 2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/12/12/israeli-premier-bennett-to-pay-first-ever-visit-to-uae>.

¹⁴⁸ Sharma, A. (2022), 'ADFD: \$32bn allocated for development projects in 103 countries since fund's inception', *The National*, 26 July 2022, <https://www.thenationalnews.com/business/economy/2022/07/26/adfd-32bn-allocated-for-development-projects-in-103-countries-since-funds-inception>.

¹⁴⁹ Interview, 12 November 2021.

capacity. The reputational benefits of being seen as an effective military power should, though, be weighed against the human rights criticism Israel receives for its treatment of Palestinians and Israeli Arabs.

The appearance of broader regional integration has critical symbolic and practical value for both Israel's image and its security, and is seen as a victory in the region. After two decades of stalled progress in the Israeli–Palestinian peace process, which yielded pragmatic ties with only Egypt and Jordan, this latest round of normalization has significantly reduced Israel's regional isolation. Symbolically, as a result of the accords, 'Israel has gained greater legitimacy in the region,' according to one interviewee.¹⁵⁰ Another interviewee stated:

No longer are Arab states individually or collectively interested in fighting Israel's regional presence. They are also no longer ignoring Israel's existence. Instead, they want to work with Israel.¹⁵¹

The religious dimension of the agreement that brings the Gulf Arab states together with Israel as 'people of the book' conveys an important message of religious commonality. Over time, Israel's hope is that normalization will help it to overcome overt criticism of its policies towards the Palestinians, and to engage more regional states in directly influencing the Palestinian leadership.

Israel's reputation has also benefited from its successful technology sector, the strength of which has attracted regional interest. For example, the 2009 book *Start-Up Nation: The Story of Israel's Economic Miracle* celebrates Israel as an innovation-led economy that has made strides in cybersecurity, fintech and health.¹⁵² This has resulted in successful technological partnerships, including with Gulf Arab states, and helped soften Israeli's image as a 'war nation'.¹⁵³

Greater integration has also allowed Israel to work in concert with the UAE to influence the US and other Western states on regional threats. Israel is enhancing strategic cooperation through its US and European lobbying capacity to pursue joint objectives of protecting regional security. Through coordinated public messaging and behind-the-scenes influence in Western capitals, Israel and the UAE have promoted aligned narratives about Iran and its menacing regional influence, alongside attempts to prevent the US and allies from reviving the JCPOA. Similar messages on the threat of extremism have also been heard in European capitals.¹⁵⁴

Areas for improvement

There can be no doubt that the Abraham Accords were imposed by the UAE leadership on its public, with little consideration given to popular consent. The Washington Institute for Near East Policy public opinion polls between November 2020 and August 2022 indicate that while Emirati attitudes towards business or sports ties with Israelis improved from 10 per cent to 43 per cent, optimism about the Abraham Accords

¹⁵⁰ Interview, 12 March 2022.

¹⁵¹ Interview, 22 April 2022.

¹⁵² Senor, D. and Singer, S. (2009), *Start-Up Nation: The Story of Israel's Economic Miracle*, New York: Twelve.

¹⁵³ Vohra, A. (2021), 'Israel Is the Arab World's New Soft Power', *Foreign Policy*, 8 March 2021, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/03/08/israel-is-the-arab-worlds-new-great-power>.

¹⁵⁴ Interview, 18 August 2022.

dropped from 47 per cent to 26 per cent during the same period,¹⁵⁵ which was largely attributed to Israel's policy towards the Palestinians. But, considering the pace of Israeli–Emirati economic activity since normalization, it becomes difficult to argue that the decision has been a widely unpopular one. As such, both sides have pushed ahead to take advantage of their new 'public' partnership, and have set in train major projects across all key sectors and industries. The limited people-to-people dynamic remains a gap that requires investment of time and effort.

Despite the positive soft power benefits of normalization, cooperation between Israel and the UAE has yet to soften either country's global image on human rights.

Despite the positive soft power benefits of normalization, cooperation between Israel and the UAE has yet to soften either country's global image on human rights. Amnesty International has drawn attention to the fact that '[g]overnments in Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Bahrain repeatedly repress dissent while investing heavily in rebranding themselves as rights-respecting states'.¹⁵⁶ In the UAE, human rights activist Ahmad Mansoor has been sentenced to 10 years in prison (where he remains as of March 2023),¹⁵⁷ while Israel's long-standing disregard of human and political rights in its treatment of Palestinians and Israeli Arabs continues. Meanwhile, cooperation in the cybersphere and the UAE's use of Israeli-made 'Pegasus' spyware¹⁵⁸ to target dissidents and governments abroad has also provided a reminder that both countries 'define security in a similar way and are willing to exercise similar controls to protect their interests'.¹⁵⁹

The UAE's interest in technology is neither benign nor benevolent. There has been a surfeit of reports about its deployment of Pegasus and how this software has been used to target enemies of the state, as defined by the UAE's political intelligence and security agencies. In fact, high-profile stories about Pegasus in Western media brought wider attention to MbZ,¹⁶⁰ who until that point had largely remained out of public view in the US and Europe. Israel's ongoing conflict with the Palestinians, its occupation of the West Bank and regional competition with Iran has led it to develop a highly sophisticated technological capacity, particularly in the areas of security, surveillance and arms production. While Israel and the UAE already shared an interest in managing and eliminating

¹⁵⁵ The Washington Institute for Near East Policy (2022), 'TWI Interactive Polling Platform', <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/twi-interactive-polling-platform>.

¹⁵⁶ Amnesty International (2022), 'Gulf: Don't believe the hype, GCC states are as repressive as they've ever been', <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2022/10/gulf-dont-believe-the-hype-gcc-states-are-as-repressive-as-theyve-ever-been>.

¹⁵⁷ Human Rights Watch (2018), 'UAE: Award-Winning Activist Jailed For 10 Years', <https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/06/01/uae-award-winning-activist-jailed-10-years>.

¹⁵⁸ Ulrichsen, K. C. (2022), 'Pegasus as a case study of evolving ties between the UAE and Israel', Gulf State Analytics, 9 June 2022, <https://gulfstateanalytics.com/pegasus-as-a-case-study-of-evolving-ties-between-the-united-arab-emirates-and-israel>.

¹⁵⁹ Remarks made at a workshop, 17 October 2021.

¹⁶⁰ Bergman, R. and Mazzeti, M. (2022), 'The Battle for the World's Most Powerful Cyberweapon', *New York Times*, 31 January 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/28/magazine/nso-group-israel-spyware.html>.

threats,¹⁶¹ the accords brought this relationship out into the open and have led to high-profile joint investments in projects for advancing such capabilities – for example, through collaboration between Mubadala Capital Investment and the company behind Pegasus, Israel’s NSO Group, which started in 2017. However, when Mubadala sought to buy NSO outright in October 2021,¹⁶² NSO cancelled its contract with the UAE, citing the use of Pegasus to target the ruler of Dubai’s ex-wife and her lawyer.¹⁶³

The collaboration also cannot obscure the UAE’s lack of progress in supporting negotiations with the Palestinian Authority (PA). The perpetuation of conflict and increasing violence in Gaza and the West Bank over the last two years has been a reputational challenge for the UAE. To push back against criticism, Emirati officials have stressed that the UAE is the only signatory state that made non-annexation of Palestinian territory a specific condition of normalization with Israel in 2020, while other states such as Bahrain or Morocco neither received nor demanded any concessions on Palestinian issues.

Another area that has not seen growth is at the people-to-people level exchanges. As one interviewee stated:

[W]hile there is clear support for national interest priorities, the UAE population continues to be frustrated by the unfair Israel securitization of the issue. This is also seen in the limited Emirati public interest in visiting Israel.¹⁶⁴

Some interviewees cautioned against believing that the high number of Israeli visitors to the UAE is indicative and pointed to the limited traffic the other way. While an estimated 450,000 Israelis have visited the UAE since the signing of the accords,¹⁶⁵ only 3,600 tourists from Bahrain, Morocco and the UAE have travelled to Israel since March 2022.¹⁶⁶ This imbalance shows that high-level diplomatic exchanges have yet to be reflected at the popular level in the Arab parties to the accords. This can partly be explained by people’s continued anger with Israeli policies towards the Palestinians.

Differences in political systems and cultural dynamics are also potential limiting factors in the Israeli–Emirati relationship. The divergence in political culture between the two countries – where one governs through coalition politics underpinned by a highly engaged civil society and the other is authoritarian and rules through directive – will be a continuous source of tension between leaderships. Indeed, while the UAE can depend on the longevity of its leadership and policy direction and, as such promise a stability in the relationship, Israel’s rough-and-tumble democratic politics and robust political culture can do no such

¹⁶¹ Ulrichsen (2022), ‘Pegasus as a case study of evolving ties between the UAE and Israel’.

¹⁶² Wiggins, K. and Srivastava, M. (2022), ‘Abu Dhabi state funds were used to buy Israeli spyware group NSO’, *Financial Times*, 31 March, 2022 <https://www.ft.com/content/09a289f1-1670-4b18-9ee2-5d9081e1773d>.

¹⁶³ Noami, H. (2021), ‘Pegasus spyware maker ends contract with UAE after UK high court’s hacking ruling’, *CNN*, 7 October 2021, <https://edition.cnn.com/2021/10/07/middleeast/pegasus-uae-hacking-intl/index.html>.

¹⁶⁴ Interview, 17 July 2022.

¹⁶⁵ Abdulkader, B. (2022), ‘Israel, UAE celebrate Abraham Accords’ 2nd anniversary with host of bilateral deals, high-level visits, 450,000 tourists to UAE’, *Emirates News Agency*, 7 September 2022, <https://wam.ae/en/details/1395303081312>.

¹⁶⁶ Kane, H. (2022), ‘Abraham Accords Two Years On: Israelis Flock to Dubai, but Where Are the Emirati Tourists?’, *Haaretz*, 15 September 2022, <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/2022-09-15/ty-article/.highlight/abraham-accords-two-years-on-israelis-flock-to-dubai-but-where-are-the-emirati-tourists/00000183-41b4-d4fb-a1d7-4bfd43c80000>.

thing. This friction has been cited by interviewees as a cause of frustration in the relationship. Netanyahu's formation of a coalition government with ultra-right-wing, anti-Arab parties has become a similar point of contention. One need only look to the Israeli–Jordanian relationship during Netanyahu's time in office to see how relations frayed at leadership level, especially over Jerusalem, despite the two countries sharing common security interests. One interviewee expected tensions to surface should Israel return to its settlement-building objectives in the West Bank, making the public appearance of friendly relations between the leaders more difficult to maintain. An asymmetry in civil society where Israeli groups have not been able to find like-minded Emirati partners also prevents the development of deeper people-to-people ties.¹⁶⁷

Another frequently mentioned issue is the process of decision-making, far slower among the Israeli political establishment and bureaucracy compared to their Emirati counterparts.¹⁶⁸ Aspects of the Israeli–Emirati relationship will likely come under pressure as changes in Israeli domestic politics restrict the serving government's room for manoeuvre or indeed give rise to shifting policies. Israel cannot provide the level of certainty over policy that the UAE can.

In the two-and-a-half years since the signing of the Abraham Accords, the Israeli–Emirati relationship has developed and deepened across multiple sectors and policy areas. The challenges discussed in this chapter, while not expected to break the relationship, will require crisis management, as well as deliberate and consistent diplomatic attention to mitigate cultural and policy differences. It is as if the two countries were pieces of a jigsaw puzzle almost fitting together, but with rough edges preventing perfect alignment.

¹⁶⁷ Nir Boms, N. and Khuzaie, A. (2022), 'Warm Peace and the Challenge of People to People Relations after the Abraham Accords', Fikra Forum Policy Analysis, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 15 April 2022, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/warm-peace-and-challenge-people-people-relations-after-abraham-accords>.

¹⁶⁸ Workshop, 17 November 2021.

05

The economic dimension

The economic relationship between Israel and the UAE has advanced considerably since the signing of the Abraham Accords. Economic considerations are likely to assume greater strategic value as other aspects of the relationship are tested.

The Israeli–Emirati economic relationship has grown quickly since the signing of the Abraham Accords. This is perhaps unsurprising given the synergies between the two countries across a broad range of sectors, including finance and investment, education, healthcare, technology, energy, agri-tech, food and water security.¹⁶⁹ Both countries seek to foster stronger partnerships across those sectors to promote domestic resilience and regional economic integration, as well as global interconnectivity.

Israel and the UAE view cooperation as a way to support their domestic industries in the short term but also achieve long-term sustainability. Israel can benefit from the UAE’s trans-shipping infrastructure to enhance its existing trade connections with Asian countries, including India, which is a key importer of Israeli and Emirati products.¹⁷⁰ The UAE represents nearly 1.5 per cent of global trade and 2.4 per cent of the global oil trade. Moreover, the UAE can help Israeli companies market their goods to countries that do not have formal relations with Israel, although in reality such products have long managed to find a route to many of those markets.

Israel offers the UAE opportunities to invest in, and access to, technology. Of particular interest to the UAE are Israel’s advanced research and development capabilities in areas including healthcare, finance, technology, energy, security

¹⁶⁹ Augustine, B. D. (2022), ‘Abu Dhabi delegation to Tel Aviv explores business co-operation with Israeli companies’, *The National*, 6 September 2022, <https://www.thenationalnews.com/business/economy/2022/09/06/abu-dhabi-delegation-to-tel-aviv-explores-business-co-operation-with-israeli-companies>.

¹⁷⁰ Al Marzooqi, O., Sarwar, S. and Schenk, Z. (2021), ‘Israel-UAE Normalization: Poised for Economic Breakout’, Washington, DC: Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington, 14 April 2021, <https://agsiw.org/israel-uae-normalization-poised-for-economic-breakout>.

and defence. Dubai FDI, for instance, has already conducted industry-specific investment webinars with potential Israeli investors to explore opportunities and partnerships offered by the emirate in these sectors.¹⁷¹

While business ties will no doubt strengthen bilateral relations and create co-dependencies, efforts to bring in additional investors have created important trilateral and multilateral ventures. Trilateral and multilateral ventures hold the potential to supercharge Israeli and Emirati exports to much larger markets,¹⁷² such as India and China, and to further embed the partnership between Israel and the UAE.

Although it is difficult to capture the full extent of economic activity since Israel and the UAE signed the Abraham Accords, Chapter 5 offers an account of major agreements and deals reached between businesses in both countries and, in some cases, third countries. It is clear, though, that the nature of the relationship differs markedly from Israel's relationships with Egypt and Jordan. Whereas local businesses in Egypt and Jordan continue to face boycotts for dealing with Israel, and often require the 'cover' of their militaries and governments to do business with Israel, many Emirati businesses have shown a willingness to work openly with Israeli partners. Moreover, unlike Egypt or Jordan, the UAE has provided a welcome and hospitable embrace to Israeli businesspeople and visitors. Furthermore, in October 2020 Israel and the UAE implemented a visa exemption agreement, the first – and so far only – such agreement between Israel and an Arab country.

The following sections survey the emerging business landscape since the signing of the Abraham Accords in September 2020. The sections focus on finance and investment, energy, technology and defence, education, healthcare, and food and water security.

Finance and investment

Israel's first free trade agreement (FTA) with an Arab state was agreed with the UAE on 31 March 2022. The FTA – which was formally signed into effect on 26 March 2023¹⁷³ – eliminates most tariffs on trade between the two countries, and is expected to increase annual bilateral trade from \$1.2 billion in 2021 (according to official Israeli data) to over \$10 billion by 2027. Most duties were eliminated immediately, while others will be removed over a three- to five-year period. Meanwhile, remaining tariffs on goods including food, medicine, diamonds, jewellery, fertilizers and other chemicals have been reduced.¹⁷⁴

¹⁷¹ Government of Dubai Media Office (2021), 'Dubai FDI signs MoU with Israeli manufacturers' association to promote cross-border investment', 22 March 2022, <https://www.mediaoffice.ae/en/news/2021/March/22-03/Dubai-FDI>.

¹⁷² Bauer, K. (2022), 'Israel-UAE Economic Cooperation Has Deep Roots And Broad Dividends', The Caravan, 8 March 2022, <https://www.hoover.org/research/israel-uae-economic-cooperation-has-deep-roots-and-broad-dividends>.

¹⁷³ Reuters (2023), 'Israel, UAE sign free trade pact into effect', 26 March 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/israel-uae-sign-free-trade-pact-into-effect-2023-03-26>.

¹⁷⁴ Cornwell, A. (2022), 'Israel, UAE boost ties with free trade pact', Reuters, 31 May 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/israel-uae-sign-free-trade-deal-ambassador-2022-05-31>.

The FTA is the foundation of the Israeli–Emirati economic partnership, and is seen on both sides as an essential part of embedding and sustaining normalization. Emirati minister of state for foreign trade Thani Al Zeyoudi stated that ‘... our agreement will accelerate growth, create jobs and lead to a new era of peace, stability, and prosperity across the region’.¹⁷⁵ And Israel’s economy and industry minister Orna Barbivai said:

It also symbolises something greater than business: the importance of building meaningful partnerships. Our agreement can demonstrate to nations and governments around the world that cooperation and dialogue are the best ways to transform challenges into opportunities.¹⁷⁶

Since the accords, government agencies from Israel and the UAE have worked closely together to create an enabling environment to attract and facilitate investment flows. For example, in September 2020, the two countries’ central banks established a cooperation agreement and signed memorandums of understanding (MoUs) defining banking and finance protocols between the two countries.¹⁷⁷ During the same month, Israel’s Bank Hapoalim and Dubai’s largest bank, Emirates NBD, agreed to promote investment and facilitate transfers and, most importantly, to allow Israelis to transact directly with the UAE.¹⁷⁸ The following month, Israel’s Export Institute and Bank Hapoalim sent 250 Israeli entrepreneurs to Abu Dhabi and Dubai to promote investments.¹⁷⁹ These developments were far-reaching, as they actively encouraged and supported direct engagement between Israelis and Emiratis. Then, in November, export credit agencies Israel Foreign Trade Risks Insurance Corporation and Etihad Credit Insurance signed a cooperation agreement to help facilitate investment, trade and exports.¹⁸⁰ In a matter of months, the Abraham Accords represented an upgraded model of normalization that went far beyond that envisaged in previous Israeli–Arab agreements.

However, the economic dimension of the Israel–UAE relationship has encountered some difficulties due to a range of factors, including differences in business practice, miscommunications, cultural dissonance and political turbulence. For instance, in March 2021, the Israeli and UAE governments announced the creation of a \$10 billion fund to encourage investment in strategically important sectors in Israel, including energy, manufacturing, water, space, healthcare and agri-tech.¹⁸¹ However, the fund was frozen in July 2021 owing to political turbulence in Israel, where four inconclusive general elections were held

¹⁷⁵ Ismail, E. and Ibrahim, L. (2022), ‘UAE, Israel sign Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement to advance bilateral trade beyond US\$10 billion in 5 years’, Emirates News Agency, 31 May 2022, <http://wam.ae/en/details/1395303052959>.

¹⁷⁶ Cornwell (2022), ‘Israel, UAE boost ties with free trade pact’.

¹⁷⁷ The two parties set up a joint committee for cooperation in finances and investment, financial services, promoting joint investments in capital markets, banking services, and payments regulations. See Ismail, E. and Aamir, M. (2020), ‘UAE, Israel agree to establish committee for banking and financial cooperation’, Emirates News Agency, 1 September 2020, <https://wam.ae/en/details/1395302866467>.

¹⁷⁸ Reuters (2020), ‘Dubai’s Emirates NDB signs MoU with Israel’s Bank Hapoalim’, 14 September 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-israel-emirates-banks-idUSKBN2652PK>.

¹⁷⁹ Stub, Z. (2021), ‘Business delegation heads to UAE ahead of World Expo’, *Jerusalem Post*, 13 September 2021, <https://www.jpost.com/jpost-tech/business-and-innovation/business-delegation-heads-to-uae-ahead-of-world-expo-679343>.

¹⁸⁰ Alghoul, R. and Abubaker, R. (2020), ‘UAE, Israel export credit agencies to boost, economic relations, trade and investments’, Emirates News Agency, 13 December 2020, <https://www.wam.ae/en/details/1395302894760>.

¹⁸¹ Naar, I. (2021), ‘UAE announces \$10 billion investment fund for Israel across multiple sectors’, *Al-Arabiya News*, 12 March 2021, <https://english.alarabiya.net/News/gulf/2021/03/12/Israel-relations-UAE-announces-10-billion-investment-fund-for-Israel-across-multiple-sectors>.

in two years.¹⁸² Although the freeze was lifted in early 2022, a paucity of major infrastructure projects has meant that no major investments have been made since this time.¹⁸³

Notwithstanding, the number of agreements signed within record time and the enthusiasm of government agencies to sponsor cooperation on finance and investment gives a clear indication of just how willing Israel and the UAE are to expand relations. Authorities in both countries have sought to foster the cross-fertilization of investment opportunities and to encourage the creation of joint initiatives, even when markets are saturated or opportunities are limited.

Energy

US-driven energy diplomacy in the region has helped integrate Israel's energy system with Egypt's natural gas domestic and export markets and Jordan's domestic natural gas market. This decade-long process laid the foundations for Israel and the UAE to work together not only in developing Israel's natural resources in the eastern Mediterranean, but also in combining their energy interests with Jordan, as detailed below. More importantly, the Abraham Accords gave a boost to US energy diplomacy, which, under the guidance of US special envoy and coordinator for international energy affairs Amos Hochstein, brokered a deal on maritime boundaries between Israel and Lebanon (and, in reality, Hezbollah) in late October 2022.¹⁸⁴ It was Israeli–Emirati normalization that cleared the path for Lebanon – and, by extension, Hezbollah – to tacitly recognize Israel and reach a compromise that served both Israeli and Lebanese economic interests. In other words, Israel and Lebanon were able to put aside their long-standing hostilities and opposing world views to participate in a mutually rewarding transaction. This agreement constitutes a major break – but not necessarily breakthrough – in regional diplomacy, and is a tangible example of just how the Abraham Accords have challenged the MENA status quo and changed the calculations of regional actors.

In the meantime, Israel and the UAE have advanced their bilateral energy relations rapidly. The eastern Mediterranean holds significant natural gas reserves, albeit small in comparison with other major world basins or fields.¹⁸⁵ The rapid development of Israeli (15.5 billion cubic metres per year) and Egyptian (70.5 billion cubic metres per year) gas fields has transformed regional energy dynamics and benefited the so-called 'normalization states' – or at least their political elites – economically, while also deepening their interdependencies. This process resembles a textbook example of a peacebuilding exercise. Furthermore, the Abraham Accords have opened opportunities for Emirati investment.

¹⁸² Mekelberg, Y. (2021), 'Israeli election produces yet another stalemate', Chatham House Expert Comment, 29 March 2021, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2021/03/israeli-election-produces-yet-another-stalemate>.

¹⁸³ Zaken, D. (2022), 'Israel-Gulf trade flourishes in two years of Abraham Accords', Al-Monitor, 9 September 2022, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2022/09/israel-gulf-trade-flourishes-two-years-abraham-accords>.

¹⁸⁴ France 24 (2022), 'Israel and Lebanon sign 'historic' US-brokered maritime border deal', 27 October 2022, <https://www.france24.com/en/middle-east/20221027-israeli-pm-lapid-claims-lebanon-recognises-israel-in-landmark-sea-border-deal>.

¹⁸⁵ For example, Qatar's North Field holds proved reserves of 24.7 trillion cubic metres, compared with Israel's 600 billion cubic metres. See BP (2021), *Statistical Review of World Energy 2021 – Natural Gas*, <https://www.bp.com/content/dam/bp/business-sites/en/global/corporate/pdfs/energy-economics/statistical-review/bp-stats-review-2021-natural-gas.pdf>.

In December 2021, Abu Dhabi’s Mubadala Petroleum took a 22 per cent stake in Israel’s Tamar gas field for \$1 billion, representing the largest commercial agreement signed between Israel and the UAE.¹⁸⁶ The deal is not just an economic proposition. It is also a strategic investment, as it ties together both countries’ long-term interests in the natural gas industry and provides Abu Dhabi with a direct route to the European gas market. It also opens opportunities for the UAE to take stakes in other Israeli assets, such as the giant Leviathan gas field (should other operators exit that project). Moreover, the investment fits with Mubadala Petroleum’s investment strategy to take positions in upstream energy projects in multiple geographies to extend the shelf-life of hydrocarbons and leverage its cash-rich position.¹⁸⁷

In December 2021, Abu Dhabi’s Mubadala Petroleum took a 22 per cent stake in Israel’s Tamar gas field for \$1 billion, representing the largest commercial agreement signed between Israel and the UAE.

Not all such investments have gone smoothly, though. The travails of the Med–Red Land Bridge project highlighted how differences in the two countries’ political systems can frustrate their economic ambitions, even if strong political will exists among their respective leaders. Israel’s democratic environment and policy process can frustrate the ambitions of senior Israeli politicians,¹⁸⁸ whereas MbZ can impose decisions without facing institutional resistance or opposition from pressure groups or civil society.

Signed in October 2020, Med–Red – which would enable Emirati crude to reach Western markets through Israel – was the subject of the first major deal after the Abraham Accords were signed. The Israeli ‘land bridge’ transporting oil from Eilat on the Red Sea to Ashkelon on the Mediterranean had already been operating for more than 50 years. Based on available information on the Israeli–Emirati initial 10-year agreement, 50 to 70 oil tankers a year will be unloaded at Eilat port, transporting some 14 million tons of crude oil a year. However, the Israeli state-owned Europe Asia Pipeline Company (EAPC) is licensed by Eilat port to receive only 2 million tons of oil a year – the equivalent of 10 to 12 tankers.

¹⁸⁶ Other project operators include Chevron (25 per cent), Isramco (28.75 per cent), Tamar Petroleum (16.75 per cent) Dor (4 per cent) and Everest (3.5 per cent). The Tamar field was discovered in 2009 and brought onstream in 2013. It delivers gas to the Israeli market, as well as to consumers in Egypt and Jordan. See NS Energy (2021), ‘Israel’s Delek to sell stake in Tamar offshore gas field to Mubadala for \$1bn’, 3 September 2021, <https://www.nsenegybusiness.com/news/israels-delek-to-sell-stake-in-tamar-offshore-gas-field-to-mubadala-for-1bn>.

¹⁸⁷ Zawya News (2021), ‘Energy transition: UAE’s Mubadala Petroleum to increase natural gas production’, 1 August 2021, <https://www.zawya.com/en/projects/energy-transition-uaes-mubadala-petroleum-to-increase-natural-gas-production-mpco6o5l>.

¹⁸⁸ Kingsley, P. (2021), ‘As 4th Election Looms, Some Ask: Is Israel’s Democracy Broken?’, *New York Times*, 17 March 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/03/17/world/middleeast/israel-election-netanyahu.html>.

To address this gap and fulfil its commitment under the Med–Red agreement, EAPC informed officials at the Israeli environmental protection ministry that it intended to expand its operations by adding five to 10 tankers a year.¹⁸⁹

However, Israeli environmental campaigners opposed the agreement on two grounds: (i) that it had not been approved by the Israeli cabinet; and (ii) that it risked damaging the Red Sea and Eilat’s coastline because of oil spills or attacks.¹⁹⁰ Therefore, the project was delayed until the Israeli High Court of Justice ruled in December 2021 that it would not block the agreement, although the court granted the environmental protection ministry the right to limit the volume of oil shipped through Israel.¹⁹¹ The delays caused by the legal challenge were a major source of frustration for the UAE and, as a means of pressuring its Israeli counterparts, Emirati officials considered the idea of building a pipeline in Egypt as an alternative to Med–Red.¹⁹²

This episode reveals stress points in the relationship between Israel and the UAE, and points to possible future limitations on cooperation. Even where Israeli and Emirati interests align, Israel’s political process could frustrate and even prevent joint projects from advancing. Although it is well beyond the scope of this paper to consider the likely trajectory of Israel’s domestic politics, that political process is undergoing its own transformation, with the government of Benjamin Netanyahu challenging the independence of state institutions – notably including the judiciary.

One area within the energy sector where Israel and the UAE are closely aligned is ‘clean’ energies. Their complementary offerings of innovative, private sector-led businesses and government-backed entities with oil-rich budgets gives both an advantageous position from which to develop, deploy and export renewable energy technologies to the Middle East and beyond. For example, the strategic partnership between Mubadala Petroleum’s ‘clean’ energy arm Masdar and an Israel-based subsidiary of France’s EDF offers opportunities to pursue renewable projects worldwide.¹⁹³ EDF Renewables Israel operates 27 solar installations in Israel, with a total capacity of nearly 490 megawatts (MW), and intended to commission six other projects by the end of 2022, including a floating solar farm in northern Israel.¹⁹⁴ Masdar and EDF Renewables are also jointly invested in projects in the UAE, such as the Al Dhafra solar project in Abu Dhabi (which will be the largest single-site solar plant in the world on completion)

¹⁸⁹ Eli, A. (2021), ‘What Israel Should Do About Controversial UAE Oil Deal’, *Haaretz*, 3 November 2021, <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/2021-11-03/ty-article/israel-uae-eilat-oil-tankers-rare-coral-reef-controversial-red-sea/0000017f-dc47-d3a5-af7f-feef3bfd0000>.

¹⁹⁰ Zaken, D. (2021), ‘UAE preparing Egyptian alternative to Israeli pipeline project’, *Globes*, 21 October 2021, <https://en.globes.co.il/en/article-uae-preparing-egyptian-alternative-to-israeli-pipeline-project-1001388124>.

¹⁹¹ Rinat, Z. (2021), ‘Israel Tells Court It Won’t Revoke UAE Oil Pipeline Deal, but Might Set Restrictions’, *Haaretz*, 16 December 2021, <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/2021-12-16/ty-article/.premium/israel-tells-court-it-wont-revoke-uae-oil-pipeline-deal-but-might-set-restrictions/0000017f-f120-d8a1-a5ff-f1aa2ab80000>.

¹⁹² Zaken, D. (2021), ‘UAE preparing Egyptian alternative to Israeli pipeline project’, *Globes*, 21 October 2021, <https://en.globes.co.il/en/article-uae-preparing-egyptian-alternative-to-israeli-pipeline-project-1001388124>.

¹⁹³ Mohamed, H. and Bashir, H. (2021), ‘Masdar and EDF Renewables enter strategic alliance to explore renewable energy opportunities in Israel’, Emirates News Agency, 21 January 2021, <https://wam.ae/en/details/1395302903355>.

¹⁹⁴ EDF Renewables (2022), ‘EDF Renewables commissions four solar power plants, including two floating, in Israel’, 8 June 2022, <https://www.edf-renewables.com/en/edf-renewables-commissions-four-solar-power-plants-including-two-floating-in-israel>.

and the 800-MW third phase of Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum Solar Park in Dubai.¹⁹⁵ Projects elsewhere in the region include the 400-MW Dumat Al Jandal wind farm project in Saudi Arabia.¹⁹⁶

The multilateral dimension of the partnership is a new development for the region. It points to a qualitative difference in the nature of the Israel–UAE relationship compared with Israel’s earlier relationships with Egypt and Jordan in terms of mutual benefits. For example, while the Israeli subsidiary of EDF Renewables benefited from Masdar’s partnership with EDF energy projects, Israel’s Ecoppia has brought similar benefits to the UAE, in partnership with India, by exporting water-saving robotic technology to Dubai.¹⁹⁷

This approach to relationship-building will help anchor the Abraham Accords against the stresses and strains in bilateral ties, as well as the challenges that arise from the regional environment. Israel’s relations with Egypt and Jordan have also endured, but ties with the UAE will go further in shaping the region’s security environment. For example, the US-guided Prosperity Green and Prosperity Blue projects provide clear examples of a nascent regional architecture, based on the Abraham Accords, that draws on other ‘normalization’ states.¹⁹⁸

Prosperity Green will see solar photovoltaic (PV) plants with a generating capacity of 600 MW built in Jordan by 2026, with the clean power produced exported to Israel. With funding and technological expertise provided by Masdar, the deal will contribute towards Israel meeting its renewable energy targets and diversifying its energy mix. Proceeds from the sale of electricity will be divided between Masdar and Jordan. In return, as part of Prosperity Blue, Israel has committed to evaluate the supply to Jordan of up to 200 million cubic metres of desalinated water.¹⁹⁹

The agreement between Israel, Jordan and the UAE on these projects serves different purposes for each party. For Jordan, the threat of water shortages is severe and, therefore, the tripartite agreement provides it with a critical resource. By encouraging a compromise between Israel and Jordan, especially on sensitive subjects such as access to shared water resources, the UAE has showcased its value as a diplomatic broker to the US and other regional players. It also establishes a materially beneficial relationship with Jordan, and helps its new partner in Israel

¹⁹⁵ Masdar (2021), ‘Masdar and EDF Renewables enter strategic alliance to explore renewable energy opportunities in Israel’, 21 January 2021, <https://news.masdar.ae/en/news/2021/01/25/10/34/masdar-and-edf-renewables>.

¹⁹⁶ In 2020, Masdar and EDF Renewables agreed to partner in eight US renewable energy projects, including wind, solar and battery-storage assets, with a total combined capacity of 1.6 GW. See Masdar (undated), ‘1.6 GW portfolio in the United States’, project page, <https://masdar.ae/Masdar-Clean-Energy/Projects/Project-16-GW-portfolio>.

¹⁹⁷ Ecoppia’s robotic solar cleaning technology was developed in Israel. Its fully autonomous, water-free robots are manufactured in India and then exported to Dubai. See Roche, E. (2021), ‘Israeli world leader in robotic solar cleaning Ecoppia, signs first landmark deal in UAE with the support of IFIICC’, Zawya News, 6 May 2021, <https://www.zawya.com/en/press-release/israeli-world-leader-in-robotic-solar-cleaning-ecoppia-signs-first-landmark-deal-in-uae-with-the-support-of-cj7wyyw7>.

¹⁹⁸ Avis, D. (2021), ‘Israel and Jordan to Sign U.S.-Backed Water-for-Energy Pact’, Bloomberg, 17 November 2021, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-11-17/israel-and-jordan-to-sign-water-for-energy-pact-backed-by-u-s>.

¹⁹⁹ Udasin, S. (2021), ‘Israel, Jordan, UAE sign pivotal deal to swap solar energy, desalinated water’, The Hill, 23 November 2021, <https://thehill.com/policy/equilibrium-sustainability/582750-israel-jordan-uae-sign-pivotal-deal-to-swap-solar-energy>.

to further its relationships with neighbouring countries. Meanwhile, Israel can reach its renewables targets, demonstrate its value to the UAE, and work constructively with Jordan despite ongoing tensions over the status of Jerusalem.²⁰⁰

Technology and defence

Cooperation on technology and defence will be the bedrock of the future Israeli–Emirati relationship. The UAE and Israel are both major tech hubs. Israel specializes in AI, blockchain, cybersecurity and quantum computing, while the UAE holds a comparative advantage in digital transformation and smart cities, plus wide-scale deployment capability. The UAE is important as a source of investment for Israeli technology companies, and as a staging post for exports to the MENA region and to Asian markets.²⁰¹ As the focus of both countries on regional security and the examples below might indicate, Israel's defence industry is the big winner from the Abraham Accords.

In March 2021, the UAE's state-owned EDGE Group agreed an MoU with IAI to develop an advanced C-UAS (counter-unmanned aircraft system) tailored to the UAE market and the wider MENA region. EDGE agreed that it would leverage its subsidiary, SIGN4L, to collaborate with IAI. Using a combination of SIGN4L and IAI products, the C-UAS comprises detection and identification systems (radar and optics, radio frequency), 'soft kill' solutions (jamming, cyber takeover) and 'hard kill' capability (guns, missiles, electromagnetic and laser-based weapons), and advance command and control.²⁰² In November, EDGE and IAI signed a second MoU to jointly develop a first-in-class series of 17-metre USVs for the entire range of military and commercial applications, including carrying out anti-submarine warfare and submarine detection operations.²⁰³

Meanwhile, in April 2021, Israel's state-owned Rafael Advanced Defence Systems, Silicon Valley-based private equity firm Silver Lake and Abu Dhabi-based tech firm Group 42 (G42) established a research and development site in Israel. Alongside this, G42 was the first UAE company to open an international office in Israel.²⁰⁴ This entity will commercialize AI and 'big data' technologies to develop products for the banking, healthcare and public safety sectors to be sold in Israel, the UAE and worldwide. The G42–Rafael partnership is both strategic and economic, as it closely ties the interests of the two countries together, aligning both tech and defence industries. Given that G42 is chaired by UAE national security adviser Sheikh Tahnoun bin Zayed Al Nahyan,²⁰⁵ the arrangement also gives a clear

²⁰⁰ France 24 (2019), 'Jordan's 25-year peace with Israel 'cold and getting colder'', 24 October 2019, <https://www.france24.com/en/20191024-jordan-s-25-year-peace-with-israel-cold-and-getting-colder>.

²⁰¹ Soliman, M. (2021), 'How tech is cementing the UAE-Israel alliance', Middle East Institute, 11 May 2021, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/how-tech-cementing-uae-israel-alliance>.

²⁰² Solomon, S. (2021), 'IAI and UAE-based EDGE join forces to develop anti-drone tech', *Times of Israel*, 11 March 2021, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/iai-and-uae-based-edge-join-forces-to-develop-anti-drone-tech>.

²⁰³ Israel Aerospace Industries (2021), 'EDGE Announces Strategic Deal with IAI to Develop Advanced Unmanned Surface Vessels', press release, 18 November 2021, <https://www.iai.co.il/edge-strategic-deal-with-iai-unmanned-surface-vessels>.

²⁰⁴ Reuters (2021), 'Abu Dhabi's G42 forms big data JV with Israeli defence company Rafael', 19 April 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/abu-dhabis-g42-forms-big-data-jv-with-israeli-defence-company-rafael-2021-04-19>.

²⁰⁵ England, A. and Kerr, S. (2021), 'The Abu Dhabi royal at the nexus of UAE business and national security', *Financial Times*, 25 January 2021, <https://www.ft.com/content/ce09911b-041d-4651-9bbb-d2a16d39ede7>.

indication of both the closeness of government-to-government relations since the Abraham Accords and the proximity of Abu Dhabi's ruling family to the Israeli political and security establishment.

Education

Although online learning is now widespread, education is still largely based on person-to-person interactions, historical and cultural frames of reference, pedagogies and the synchronizing and disaggregation of ideas and philosophies. It is unsurprising, then, that the pace of change described in sections above has not been matched in the area of education, although there is a desire from the UAE leadership to foster exchange programmes and to learn from Israel's record of intellectual achievements.

However, to date, there have only been two significant advances. First, an academic partnership between the University of Haifa in Israel and the UAE's Zayed University. In November 2021, the two universities also signed an MoU, agreeing to undertake joint research projects (particularly in the field of environmental sciences), facilitate university-wide knowledge exchanges and share best practices. In the same month, the Israeli and Emirati ministries of education signed an MoU on cooperation in education, as part of which it was agreed to form a joint committee to promote coordination between educational institutes in both countries, including general, higher, technical and vocational colleges.²⁰⁶ The significant number of students from each country who study abroad has made implementing the arrangements of mutual visits, training courses, events, conferences and student exchange programmes relatively easy.

The education dimension of the Israeli–Emirati relationship will grow at a much slower pace than other areas, and will likely be influenced by the UAE population's hesitancy in engaging with Israeli institutions. While enforcement of the Arab boycott against Israel has long since been relaxed, education remains one area where Arab academics and students alike could possibly seek to resist normalization.

Healthcare

Meanwhile, healthcare is another area of the Israel–UAE relationship that has advanced at a rapid pace in recent years. This advance has been partly a response to the global COVID-19 pandemic, as well as the UAE's desire to serve as a healthcare hub between Asia, Europe and North America.²⁰⁷ As such, the UAE

²⁰⁶ Godinho, V. (2021), 'UAE, Israel sign MoU to cooperate in education sector', Gulf Business, 21 November 2021, <https://gulfbusiness.com/uae-israel-sign-mou-to-cooperate-in-education-sector>.

²⁰⁷ Verma, J. (2020), 'UAE is Set to Become Hub of Medical Tourism', Omnia Health, 12 January 2020, <https://insights.omnia-health.com/hospital-management/uae-set-become-hub-medical-tourism>.

aims to leverage its relationship with Israel to position itself as the medical research and development hub in the region and, by doing so, establish a lead in healthcare before other regional players seek similar normalization agreements with Israel.

Cooperation has been notable in medical research, healthcare provision, consultations, data infrastructure, medical-to-military support, training and medical tourism. For example, in August 2020 Israeli firm Pluristem and Abu Dhabi's Stem Cells Centre signed a non-binding cooperation agreement to develop therapies for diseases, share samples, and combine use of equipment and testing. The two firms also agreed to collaborate in the areas of cell therapy and regenerative medicine.²⁰⁸ What is striking about this agreement is that it was reached just before the Abraham Accords were signed, and was initiated by the Indian think-tank Better Alternatives.

Cooperation on professional training, medical tourism and COVID-19 treatments, including remote treatment, formed the basis of a preliminary agreement signed by Sheba Medical Center (Israel) and APEX National Investment (UAE) during September 2020.²⁰⁹ The establishment of an Israeli-operated clinic in Dubai was a breakthrough in medical provision, as it amounted to a form of people-to-people engagement, though it is unclear how many members of staff at the clinic will be Emiratis. The integration of Israeli medical research and healthcare provision into Emirati hospitals and health centres is considered an important part of normalizing interaction at the local level, in a way that directly affects families in the UAE and the Gulf Arab states.²¹⁰

The integration of Israeli medical research and healthcare provision into Emirati hospitals and health centres is considered an important part of normalizing interaction at the local level, in a way that directly affects families in the UAE and the Gulf Arab states.

Both deals show that, even before the accords, medical professionals in each country already shared a desire to cooperate and jointly address research challenges.

Agreements in the healthcare sector continued after the signing of the Abraham Accords. In late October 2021, the Israeli and Emirati ministries of health agreed to recognize one another's COVID-19 vaccination certificates leading

²⁰⁸ Pluristem Therapeutics (2020), 'Pluristem and Abu Dhabi Stem Cells Center Sign MOU to Collaborate in the Development of Cell Therapies and Regenerative Medicines for the Treatment of Severe Diseases Including COVID-19', 17 August 2021, <https://www.pluristem.com/news-and-events/pluristem-abu-dhabi-stem-cells-center-sign-mou-collaborate-development-cell-therapies-regenerative-medicines-treatment-severe-diseases-including-covid-19>.

²⁰⁹ The ARC Gulf Initiative is intended to lead to the creation of a medical hub, supporting start-ups and providing both a comprehensive data infrastructure and a network to launch initiatives into the wider region. See *Khaleej Times* (2020), 'UAE's Apex National Investment signs agreement with Israel's Sheba Medical Center', 24 September 2020, <https://www.khaleejtimes.com/local-business/uaes-apex-national-investment-signs-agreement-with-israels-sheba-medical-center>.

²¹⁰ Chaudhary, S. B. (2021), 'UAE-Israel cooperation: Health care can help build bridges, director-general of Sheba Medical Centre says', *Gulf Business*, 22 October 2021, <https://gulfnews.com/uae/health/uae-israel-cooperation-health-care-can-help-build-bridges-director-general-of-sheba-medical-centre-says-1.83028373>.

to both countries agreeing procedures for unrestricted movement of vaccinated individuals. This initiative was intended to facilitate continued travel between the two countries during the COVID-19 pandemic.²¹¹

Food and water security

Water and food security are policy priorities for both Israel and the UAE, owing to the regional context and growing competition for resources amid the threat of climate change and the increasing scarcity of water.

Both countries consider food insecurity, which increased during the COVID-19 pandemic and, latterly, following Russia's February 2022 invasion of Ukraine, to be a major threat. Hence, Israel's ministry of agriculture and rural development and the UAE's ministry of food and water security reached an agreement on agricultural cooperation in July 2021. The ministries committed to work together to identify expertise, technologies and best practices in the food value chain.²¹² Their agreement marks a decisive shift away from the UAE's earlier practice of mitigating against the threat of food insecurity by investing in farmlands in littoral states on the west coast of the Red Sea, a policy that resulted in limited success.^{213,214}

A partnership agreement on water security between Abu Dhabi-based agribusiness firm Bayunah and Israeli water tech firm Watergen is another example of where businesses from both countries are investing in long-term water solutions.²¹⁵ The focus on the long term gives a clear indication that partners in both countries view the partnership as enduring rather than merely tactical.

Although economic relations between Israel and the UAE started from a low base in 2020, they have advanced at pace since then and have brought together entities in both public and private sectors. Given a strong push from the UAE leadership and an energetic pull from the Israeli private sector, both countries have leveraged their comparative advantages and developed sustainable partnerships in many strategic sectors of their economies. As such, the economic aspect of the relationship will not only help the partnership endure should circumstances change and place bilateral ties under severe pressure, but it will also likely catalyse a new era of economic relations among other states in the MENA region.

²¹¹ The MoU was signed virtually by Abdul Rahman bin Mohammad bin Nasser al-Owais, the UAE's minister of health and prevention, and Nitzan Horowitz, the Israeli minister of health. Al-Owais commented that the MoU had come as part of the cooperation agreement concluded by the two countries to enhance coordination in large-scale health initiatives, unify efforts and exchange knowledge and expertise with regard to confronting pandemics by employing digital health, AI and innovation, and using milestones in personalized medicine, while promoting healthcare in accordance with best international practices. See Godinho, V. (2021), 'UAE, Israel sign MoU on mutual recognition of Covid-19 vaccination certificates', *Gulf Business*, 25 October 2021, <https://gulfbusiness.com/uae-israel-sign-mou-on-mutual-recognition-of-covid-19-vaccination-certificates>.

²¹² The agreement funds research and development in the use of fruit and vegetable strains able to withstand desert conditions, cooperation in aquaculture and inland agriculture, and cooperation in irrigation water management with advanced technologies. See Israel Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development (2021), 'A first: Israel signs agricultural cooperation agreement with the United Arab Emirates', press release, 13 July 2021, https://www.gov.il/en/departments/news/ue_agreement.

²¹³ Hultberg, L. (2021), 'Can the UAE Solve the GERD Dilemma?', *Gulf International Forum*, 17 August 2021, <https://gulrif.org/can-the-uae-solve-the-gerd-dilemma>.

²¹⁴ England, A. and Terazono, E. (2020), 'Pandemic revives Gulf fears over food security', *Financial Times*, 5 August 2020, <https://www.ft.com/content/5ff72ce2-5947-497e-ac83-4aa4d008a73d>.

²¹⁵ Alfaham, T. (2020), 'Al Dahra, Israel's Watergen sign strategic partnership in water security', *Emirates News Agency*, 26 November 2020, <https://wam.ae/en/details/1395302890325>.

06

The multilateral dimension

Following the signing of the Abraham Accords, recent, interconnected trends and events have catalysed a shift from bilateralism to multilateralism in the MENA region.

Both Israel and the UAE intend to leverage the opportunities arising from their fast-developing relationship beyond the bilateral to influence regional security dynamics. Alongside political, diplomatic and economic normalization, a broader security reorganization of the Middle East regional order is under way. As discussed in Chapters 3 and 4, a plethora of other economic and political groupings have emerged that have paved the way for greater regional collaboration.

Additionally, four interconnected trends and events have helped facilitate this shift in regional state behaviour. They include: (i) continued uncertainty and insecurity regarding the US's security role in the region; (ii) a region-wide trend of de-escalation, partly motivated by conflict fatigue; (iii) the emergence of several multilateral forums for regional cooperation; and (iv) the formal incorporation of Israel into CENTCOM. The shifts represented by the above have led to the emergence of multiple forums allowing regional states to find common ground and pragmatically engage in multilateral discussions.

The US security role in the Middle East

Most interviewees consistently pointed out that the uncertain role of the US remains a primary motivator behind the regional reorganization under way. The prevailing concern for most regional states, as has been reiterated throughout this paper, has been continued anxiety over the long-term US security commitment to the Middle East. Even though the US has not materially drawn down, or 'pivoted' away from, its regional positions, perceptions of declining US interest continue

to drive discord and disquiet among regional governments. US officials have indicated that they are aware of such frustrations but are often dismissive. Many in Washington see their actions as ‘never enough’.²¹⁶

These concerns have been further exacerbated by the sense that the Biden administration intended to deprioritize the region. Middle East states felt that the administration’s first year in office had focused on resurrecting negotiations over the JCPOA and ending the war in Yemen, rather than on a broader regional strategy from the outset.²¹⁷ Among Biden’s first appointments were those of Tim Lenderking as Yemen envoy and Rob Malley on Iran negotiations.²¹⁸ Those objectives clearly required a more balanced approach from that pursued under the Trump administration. From the beginning of its term, the Biden administration’s review of offensive weapons sales to the Gulf Arab states and continued talk of human rights, directed at Saudi Arabia and MbS in particular,²¹⁹ further deepened these fissures and mobilized regional states to review, diversify and invest in upgrading their security positions.

Middle East states felt that the Biden administration’s first year in office had focused on resurrecting negotiations over the JCPOA and ending the war in Yemen, rather than on a broader regional strategy from the outset.

The outbreak of the war in Ukraine has also intensified these concerns. Watching as the US and its European partners quickly mobilized military and economic support for Ukraine from early 2022, the US’s Middle East partners concluded that regional security threats coming from Iran were being compartmentalized due to negotiations over the JCPOA. Gulf-based policymakers also privately expressed frustration that the West was overlooking the – in their view – legitimate threat from Iran.²²⁰ Regional reactions to the Russian invasion of Ukraine further exacerbated existing tensions. These reactions included Gulf Arab states’ neutral positioning and OPEC+ arrangements that required Saudi Arabia and the UAE to coordinate and stabilize oil prices with Russia, rather than support Western calls to increase supply. Within the region, meanwhile, some states argued that economic and security concerns, particularly due to Russia’s presence in Syria and ties with Iran, necessitated continued diplomatic relations with Russia.

However, Biden’s July 2022 visit to the Middle East marked a shift in the US posture and a recognition that the regional security atmosphere since the accords was changing. ‘The administration saw regional dialogues in a positive

²¹⁶ Interviews, 14 July 2022 and 22 November 2022.

²¹⁷ Reuters (2022), ‘U.S. envoy heads to Middle East to push Yemen peace talks’, 25 July 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/us-envoy-heads-middle-east-push-yemen-peace-talks-2022-07-25>.

²¹⁸ Spetalnick, M. and Mohammed, A. (2021), ‘Former Obama aide Malley named Biden’s top envoy on Iran: official’, Reuters, 28 January 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-iran-envoy-idUSKBN29X2XQ>.

²¹⁹ Borger, J. and Wintour, P. (2021), ‘Biden announces end to US support for Saudi-led offensive in Yemen’, *Guardian*, 4 February 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/feb/04/us-end-support-saudi-led-operations-yemen-humanitarian-crisis>.

²²⁰ Interviews, 14 October 2022 and 20 November 2022.

light that could be leveraged,’ said one official. Through increased public contact, an alignment in threat perception was emerging between Israel and normalized Arab states experiencing air, land and sea challenges. ‘Opportunities for regional security cooperation have been enhanced by working with Israel which can provide important access to cutting-edge technology,’ stated another official.

This thinking has been further captured in the 2022 NSS that made clear that there is no single sustainable US approach to managing the range of regional threats. Instead, the strategy makes clear that US interests will be best served by supporting the multiple bilateral and multilateral processes that are under way. This acknowledgment has created room for US- and CENTCOM-led backing for a process that would begin with information- and intelligence-sharing and would slowly lead to an enhanced early-warning system and perhaps more.

De-escalation dynamics

One immediate outcome of the accords has been a region-wide trend of de-escalation, partly motivated by conflict fatigue among Middle East leaders. As stated by one interviewee: ‘Everyone in the region has been collectively weakened and this period could be a mutually hurting stalemate of regional tensions.’²²¹ The COVID-19 pandemic has also lent greater urgency to de-escalation: another interviewee commented that ‘the pandemic exposed not just the economic vulnerability throughout the region but also its geographic connectivity’.²²²

This has led to an unprecedented wave of diplomatic contact that has resulted in outreach across the region. The UAE started this process with the resumption of high-level UAE–Iran relations, beginning in 2019. Four rounds of bilateral talks between Saudi Arabia and Iran, organized by Iraq, have also sought to stabilize tensions. These discussions remain stalled due to the stalemate over the JCPOA and ongoing protests in Iran. Other, more productive examples include the end of the Qatar crisis. The 2021 Al-Ula agreement negotiations, led by Saudi Arabia, to a significant extent reset GCC ties after the 2017 blockade of Qatar. Strengthening of ties between Egypt and Qatar has also been under way.²²³ Elsewhere, the UAE has taken the lead in restoring Arab state ties with the Assad regime in Syria, with other states including Egypt and Oman showing willingness to restore Syria to the Arab League.²²⁴ The March 2022 reconciliation between Turkey and the UAE,²²⁵ followed by a similar rapprochement between Turkey and Saudi Arabia, has meanwhile formally ended a decade-long rivalry between Turkey and these GCC states.²²⁶ This has also been followed by a restoration of Israeli–Turkish relations.²²⁷

²²¹ Interview, 5 May 2022.

²²² Interview, 17 July 2022.

²²³ *The Independent* (2022), ‘Egypt’s president in Qatar on 1st visit amid rapprochement’, 13 September 2022, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/qatar-ap-egypt-doha-cairo-b2166478.html>.

²²⁴ Makki, D. (2022), ‘The UAE paves way for Syria’s return to the Arab fold, but plenty of hurdles remain’, Middle East Institute, 31 January 2022, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/uae-paves-way-syrias-return-arab-fold-plenty-hurdles-remain>.

²²⁵ Hurriyet Daily News (2021), ‘Turkey, UAE sign cooperation agreements as they restore ties’, 25 November 2021, <https://www.hurriyetsdailynews.com/uae-crown-prince-to-visit-turkey-169581>.

²²⁶ Al Jazeera (2022), ‘A new era’: Saudi Arabia’s MBS in Turkey as nations mend ties’, 22 June 2022, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/6/22/saudi-crown-prince-mbs-visits-turkey-as-countries-normalise-ties>.

²²⁷ Kershner, I. (2022), ‘Israel and Turkey to Restore Full Diplomatic Ties’, *New York Times*, 17 August 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/08/17/world/middleeast/israel-turkey-relations-ambassadors.html>.

Another critical example of this trend came on 10 March 2023, when it was announced that Chinese-brokered talks between Iran and Saudi Arabia had resulted in an agreement to restore diplomatic ties, which had been severed since 2016, and reopen embassies within two months.²²⁸ It is expected that Bahrain will also resume diplomatic engagement with Iran, formally ending the Gulf countries' strategy of support for 'maximum pressure' and containment.²²⁹

The direct effect of this de-escalation has been a reduction in overt tensions and suggests that a new approach to regional conflict management is under way. One observer commented that 'Gulf states in particular have recognized that in the absence of US support, direct regional competition has not only increased their vulnerabilities but also provided Iran with greater strategic opportunities'.²³⁰ What remains unclear is if these bilateral ties are reflective of a tactical recalibration or part of a broader regional reset in managing tensions. This pattern of dialogue is seen by others as tied to inconsistent US security support. For Saudi Arabia in particular, the September 2019 attacks on its oil infrastructure caused a change in thinking. Outreach to Iran was an opportunity to hedge against further attacks and directly manage, rather than outsource, its security.

Emerging multilateral regional cooperation

Reflecting the regional security vacuum and reduced dependency on US diplomacy, a secondary outcome of fluctuating regional dynamics can be seen in the emergence of multiple multilateral regional summits. These summits also showcase a new pattern of cooperation that aims to exert greater regional agency over conflicts. Dubai-based analyst Mohamed Baharoon has described this as part of a 'networked world order ... [where] ... states can engage in multiple relationships based on national and regional interests rather than affinity to one ideology or another'.²³¹ Many of these initiatives are in their nascent stage and it is too early to assess their durability. But together they point to a new trend of 'strategic flexibility'. One interviewee characterized the new regional atmosphere by saying: 'These dynamics showcase that this is not an and/or, with us or against us world anymore. Multilateral and trilateral coordination allows for diversification and greater security interdependence.'²³²

The Baghdad summit

The August 2021 Baghdad summit was organized by former Iraqi prime minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi and supported by the French government. It represented the first occasion for competing regional actors to convene. Heads of state, heads of government and foreign ministers from Egypt, Iran, Jordan, Kuwait, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Turkey

²²⁸ Hafezi, P., Abdallah, N. and El Yaakoubi, A. (2023), 'Iran and Saudi Arabia agree to resume ties in talks brokered by China', Reuters, 10 March 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/iran-saudi-arabia-agree-resume-ties-re-open-embassies-iranian-state-media-2023-03-10>.

²²⁹ Amwaj.media (2023), 'Exclusive: Bahrain, Iran held 'low-profile exchanges' amid Iranian-Saudi détente', 14 March 2023, <https://amwaj.media/article/exclusive-bahrain-iran-held-low-profile-exchanges-amid-iranian-saudi-detente>.

²³⁰ Interview, 19 March 2022.

²³¹ Baharoon, M. (2022), 'The keys to reading the UAE's strategic map', Middle East Institute, 5 April 2022, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/keys-reading-uaes-strategic-map>.

²³² Interview, 11 August 2022.

and the UAE attended. With such a broad array of actors at the table, and as the only initiative that currently includes Iranian participation, perhaps unsurprisingly there was no alignment on issues for discussion at the summit. As such, the participants agreed to focus their deliberations solely on Iraq's political stability.

In the final communiqué that mainly showcased a commitment to support the Iraqi federal government, the participants 'acknowledged that the region faces common challenges that require the countries of the region to deal with them on the basis of joint cooperation and mutual interests in accordance with the principles of good neighbourliness, non-interference in the internal affairs of countries, and respect of national sovereignty'.²³³ No advances were achieved, but the diverse participation that brought together many states with strained relations was seen to be positive in itself.

While Iran's regional activities are unlikely ever to be the sole focus of discussions, greater direct diplomacy with Iran is important to stabilize tensions and entrench de-escalatory patterns.

Domestic challenges relating to government formation in Iraq and the replacement of Kadhimi as Iraqi prime minister by Mohammad Shiaa al-Sudani in October 2022 led to delays in convening regional actors for further meetings. Limited progress in Iranian–Saudi dialogue – in which Kadhimi played a crucial convening role – obstructed efforts to reconvene the two parties as well.

French coordination efforts continued, meanwhile, with the objective of gathering the same actors together in Amman with a more focused, confidence-building agenda.²³⁴ The second conference was held in December 2022, bringing together the same group with the addition of Bahraini and Omani officials. While again no advances were achieved and Iran–Saudi dialogue was not revived during this meeting (rather being achieved through Chinese mediation in March 2023), the forum released another communiqué reinforcing solidarity for Iraq's stability and 'supporting Iraq's central role in expanding regional economic cooperation and building bridges of dialogue to end tensions and establish regional relations of mutual benefits'.²³⁵ There is an intention to hold a third conference in the second half of 2023, with the aim of introducing a thematic focus to the conversation.

As this is the only forum that has included Iranian participation alongside significant Arab regional states, greater diplomatic efforts are needed to provide momentum to this process. One interviewee argued that '[t]he regular repetition of this gathering can serve as an important point of departure for gradual dialogue'.²³⁶ While Iran's regional activities are unlikely ever to be the sole focus

²³³ Embassy of the Republic of Iraq in London (2021), 'Final Communiqué of the Baghdad Conference for Cooperation and Partnership', <https://mofa.gov.iq/london/en/2021/08/28/final-communiqué-of-the-baghdad-conference-for-cooperation-and-partnership>.

²³⁴ Interview, 28 September 2022.

²³⁵ Jordan News (2022), 'Final communiqué released at conclusion of second Baghdad Conference', 21 December 2022, <https://www.jordannews.jo/Section-109/News/Final-communiqué-C3%A9-released-at-conclusion-of-second-Baghdad-Conference-25961>.

²³⁶ Interview, 23 January 2023.

of these discussions, greater direct diplomacy with Iran is important to stabilize regional tensions and entrench de-escalatory patterns. Additionally, thematic discussions on climate or trade could build much-needed additional confidence and trust among participants.

The Negev summit

Alongside the Baghdad initiative, the twin March 2021 summits in Sharm el-Sheikh and Negev brought Israel together with a growing coalition of Arab states. Sharm el-Sheikh was a trilateral Emirati, Egyptian and Israeli event,²³⁷ while the Negev summit convened Israel along with Bahrain, Egypt, Morocco and the UAE, with the US also present, to build and support the normalization agreements through economic and security cooperation.²³⁸

The Negev summit was a first of its kind and regarded as a significant achievement, due to it being regionally managed and implemented without the US playing its usual coordination role, as, for example, in the 1991 Madrid peace talks. Symbolically, the meeting showcased Israel's regional integration, while Egypt's participation not only vindicated its own 1979 peace with Israel but also enabled stronger economic and political cooperation. Jordan was invited but did not attend, as a demonstration of its frustration over the Palestinian issue.²³⁹ The prospect of the US returning to the JCPOA and the implications of that re-entry for regional states featured high on the summit's agenda. Moreover, as in 2015, a range of Middle East states – including Bahrain, Israel, Saudi Arabia and the UAE – opposed US efforts to reach a deal with Iran for fear that it would: i) legitimize Iran's quest to develop a fully functioning nuclear programme and achieve threshold status; and ii) incentivize Iran to further destabilize the region through its proxy groups.

Whereas in the past, the US would have taken the lead in convening regional states, it was much more of an observer at the Negev summit and Secretary of State Blinken played a secondary role. Moreover, the regional states present – though largely misaligned in their expected outcomes from the summit – conveyed their common concern that the US is no longer as committed to the region.²⁴⁰ Formerly, the US played an indispensable role in bringing Israel and Arab states together; it was instrumental in pushing for the Israeli–Egyptian and Israeli–Jordanian peace treaties. Although Norway facilitated the secret talks between Israelis and Palestinians resulting in the Oslo Process, it was the US (and the administration of Bill Clinton) in particular that brought Yitzhak Rabin and Yasser Arafat together on the White House lawn in September 1993 to sign the Oslo Accords.²⁴¹ The US then shepherded the peace process until the intifada of 2002.²⁴²

²³⁷ Reuters (2022), 'U.S. welcomes trilateral summit between Egypt, Israel, UAE', 22 March 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/us-welcomes-trilateral-summit-between-egypt-israel-uae-2022-03-22>.

²³⁸ Ravid, B. (2022), 'Negev summit highlights Israel's new regional partnerships', Axios, 28 March 2022, <https://www.axios.com/2022/03/28/negev-summit-isreal-uae-egypt-morocco-blinken>.

²³⁹ Hamzawy, A. (2022), 'The Negev Summit's Participants Had Wildly Different Goals', commentary, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 6 April 2022, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2022/04/06/negev-summit-s-participants-had-wildly-different-goals-pub-86826>.

²⁴⁰ Abdul-Hussain, H. (2022), 'Blinken plays role of political activist at Negev summit', *Arab News*, 20 March 2022, <https://arab.news/z65k3>.

²⁴¹ Wermenbol, G. (2018), 'The Oslo Accords 25 years on', Middle East Institute, 3 October 2018, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/oslo-accords-25-years>.

²⁴² Elgindy, K. (2018), 'Four lessons for the post-Oslo era', Brookings Institution, 13 September 2018, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2018/09/13/four-lessons-for-the-post-oslo-era>.

It was striking, therefore, both that Israel and the normalization states convened their own summit in Negev without US leadership and that they were so tightly knit when criticizing US regional policy.²⁴³

Amid both the war in Ukraine and concerns over the US role in the Middle East, the Negev meeting provided an opportunity for states which see Iran as a regional threat to discuss their concerns directly. The principal outcomes of the meeting, beyond the mere publicity value, were a commitment to make the meeting a rotating forum and the establishment of six working groups to coordinate on education, energy, food and water security, health, security and tourism.²⁴⁴ These working groups are also aimed at coordinating steps to improve living conditions in the Palestinian Territories. Since the initial meeting, members convened in Bahrain in June 2022 to set up the structure of the forum. The working groups are set to meet three times a year.²⁴⁵ In January 2023, the Negev working groups convened in Abu Dhabi to begin preparations for the planned March 2023 meeting in Morocco.²⁴⁶ It is hoped that, with time, they could build greater institutional cooperation on hard and soft security issues and form the basis for a broader institutional framework, but such a process will require dedicated diplomatic activity that is directed towards specific goals.

While one US observer saw these developments as significant for 'bottom-up' processes and trust among regional partners, the long-term nature of this project will not lead to 'quick wins' or swift regional transformations.²⁴⁷ Indeed, in the first meeting, Israeli foreign minister Yair Lapid took the opportunity to foreshadow Israel's broader objective of creating 'a new regional architecture to deter common enemies'.²⁴⁸ Egypt, however, made clear its view that the summit did not signal participation in a broader regional security structure. With heightened tensions over the new Israeli government's posture towards the Palestinians, reports suggested that the March 2023 meeting in Morocco is likely to be postponed. It should be noted that Jordan also continues to refuse participation. Should a postponement happen, this demonstrates that normalization alone will not lead to a full embrace of Israel without progress on Palestinian issues. Moreover, it foreshadows that this process cannot on its own serve as an arena for dialogue and conflict resolution. The path to regional security alongside thematically based cooperation requires continued planning and persistence alongside inclusion of the issue of Palestine to overcome the endemic challenges.²⁴⁹

²⁴³ Hamzawy (2022), 'The Negev Summit's Participants Had Wildly Different Goals'.

²⁴⁴ Bassist, R. (2022), 'Negev Summit steering committee hatches plans in Bahrain', *Al-Monitor*, 27 June 2022, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2022/06/negev-summit-steering-committee-hatches-plans-bahrain>.

²⁴⁵ Nashar, K. (2023), 'Negev Forum's Working Groups Meeting – Host's Summary', *Emirates News Agency*, 10 January 2023, <https://wam.ae/en/details/1395303117696>.

²⁴⁶ The steering committee's gathering in Abu Dhabi is the third since the inaugural Negev Summit in March 2022. The committee previously met in Bahrain in July and online in October. See Naar, I. (2023), 'Negev Forum working group meetings conclude in Abu Dhabi', *The National*, 10 January 2023, <https://www.thenationalnews.com/mena/2023/01/10/negev-forum-working-group-meetings-conclude-in-abu-dhabi>.

²⁴⁷ Interview, 3 April 2022.

²⁴⁸ Bassist, R. and Szuba, J. (2022), 'Israeli, Arab summit seeks 'new regional architecture' against Iran', *Al-Monitor*, 28 March 2022, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2022/03/israeli-arab-summit-seeks-new-regional-architecture-against-iran>.

²⁴⁹ *Middle East Monitor* (2023), 'Negev Forum meeting delayed due to Israeli escalation against Palestinians', 20 February 2023, <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20230220-negev-forum-meeting-delayed-due-to-israeli-escalation-against-palestinians>.

Israeli participation in CENTCOM

In January 2021, the US Department of Defense announced the expansion of CENTCOM's geographical remit to include Israel. This decision – signed off under the Trump administration – was made after the realization that US and Israeli shared and perceived threats in the region were ineffectively handled by the existing organizational division of responsibilities. Israel had previously fallen under the aegis of the US European Command (EUCOM). However, threats to both countries were emanating from geographies under CENTCOM's purview – in particular, from Iran, Lebanon and Yemen.²⁵⁰

Much like the political relationship between Israel and the UAE, Israeli engagement with Middle East-based CENTCOM predated formal partnership. High-level meetings between US and Israeli defence personnel had been quietly conducted for years, and by 2016, a three-way dialogue between the Israel Defense Forces (IDF), CENTCOM and EUCOM had been established. The overlap between the three parties' interests, and the threats emerging across the region at the time, made closer CENTCOM-IDF operational cooperation an inevitable next step.²⁵¹

The gradual rapprochement between Israel and some of its Arab neighbours in recent years – leading to the signing of the Abraham Accords – and the rising, shared threat of Iran allowed for Israel's formal involvement in the CENTCOM structure.

Israel's inclusion in CENTCOM at this point was also a reflection of the changing realities on the ground. At CENTCOM's establishment in 1983, most Middle Eastern states did not recognize Israel. But the gradual rapprochement between Israel and some of its Arab neighbours in recent years – leading to the signing of the Abraham Accords – and the rising, shared threat of Iran allowed for Israel's formal involvement in the CENTCOM structure.

The shift, however, is not unprecedented – the US has routinely made alterations to the United Command Plan to reflect, and respond to, changing realities on the ground. For example, Lebanon and Syria were moved under CENTCOM in 2004,²⁵² the Africa Command (AFRICOM) was established in 2007²⁵³ and PACOM was renamed Indo-Pacific Command (INDOPACOM) in 2018²⁵⁴ – all in response to geopolitical developments and policy priorities.

²⁵⁰ Orion, A. and Montgomery, M. (2021), 'Moving Israel to CENTCOM: Another Step Into the Light', The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 28 January 2021, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/moving-israel-centcom-another-step-light>.

²⁵¹ Orion, A. and Dekel, U. (2021), 'Winds of Change: Israel Joins the US Central Command Area', INSS Insight No. 1432, Tel Aviv: Institute for National Strategic Studies, 20 January 2021, <https://www.inss.org.il/publication/centcom>.

²⁵² Orion and Montgomery (2021), 'Moving Israel to CENTCOM'.

²⁵³ United States Africa Command (undated), 'History of U.S. Africa Command', <https://www.africom.mil/history-of-us-africa-command>.

²⁵⁴ Copp, T. (2018), 'INDOPACOM, it is: US Pacific Command gets renamed', Military Times, 30 May 2018, <https://www.militarytimes.com/news/your-military/2018/05/30/indo-pacom-it-is-pacific-command-gets-renamed>.

Several potential problems arise from Israel's inclusion. First, on a practical level, the financial and operational requirements from CENTCOM increase. However, US officials have stated that such increases will be inconsequential and will have little effect on the daily operation of the command. Second, there is a risk that the US's relationships with other CENTCOM partners may suffer owing to opposition to Israel over the Palestinian issue, although disagreements between the members of multilateral military groupings are not uncommon – for example, Turkey within NATO. Finally, the US's ability to distance itself from Israeli military activities could be compromised by the IDF's participation, although in reality, the close ties between the two are already widely acknowledged and strategic coordination between the US and Israel already assumed.²⁵⁵

Despite these challenges, the benefits of Israeli integration appear to outweigh the risks. First, cooperation can serve as a first step towards the US's goal of establishing a regional security framework for the Middle East, partly to burden-share with Middle Eastern partners but also to allow the US to focus more on China. Second, CENTCOM can also provide a mechanism for Israel to communicate and cooperate with those Arab states not yet party to the Abraham Accords, furthering the US's ambition of broadening the number of signatories. Finally, Israeli participation enables the expansion of joint military and naval exercises – several of which have already been conducted with, and alongside, Arab states. In November 2021, the US coordinated the first publicly acknowledged joint naval drill between its navy and those of Bahrain, Israel and the UAE.²⁵⁶ February 2022 saw Israel participate for the first time in the US-led International Maritime Exercise (IME), alongside Oman and Saudi Arabia – despite the lack of formal diplomatic relations between Israel and those states. Comprising over 60 countries, the IME covers the Persian Gulf, Arabian Sea, Gulf of Oman, Red Sea and north Indian Ocean.²⁵⁷ In August 2022, the US and Israel held a bilateral training event in the Red Sea, designed to improve interoperability between their respective maritime interdiction teams.²⁵⁸

Joint exercises and drills of this kind serve several purposes. On a routine level, they are designed to strengthen, and display, capability to protect freedom of navigation and the free flow of trade, which is vital to ensuring regional security and stability. They also act as a deterrent to any potentially disruptive forces. From Israel's perspective, these recent exercises help to counter Iran's power projection in the region. The exercises have also facilitated discussions and coordination around a long-term collective security process. However, such overt demonstrations of power – as a foreign policy tool, as well as a military one – could serve to further provoke Iran and its proxies into a circular cycle of threat, deterrent and response.

²⁵⁵ Orion and Montgomery (2021), 'Moving Israel to CENTCOM'.

²⁵⁶ Reuters (2021), 'UAE, Bahrain, Israel and U.S. forces in first joint naval drill', 11 November 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/uae-bahrain-israel-us-forces-conduct-red-sea-military-exercise-2021-11-11>.

²⁵⁷ Barrington, L. (2022), 'Israel participates in huge U.S. Mideast naval exercise alongside Saudi, Oman', Reuters, 2 February 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/israel-participates-huge-us-gulf-naval-exercise-alongside-saudi-oman-2022-02-02>.

²⁵⁸ Fabian, E. (2022), 'Israel holds Red Sea navy drill, after warning Iran's maritime activity is growing', *Times of Israel*, 1 August 2022, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/israel-holds-red-sea-navy-drill-after-warning-irans-maritime-activity-is-growing>.

The RSC

The creation of a regional security construct (RSC) aims to bring together regional states with Israel and CENTCOM to support greater military integration and coordination across the MENA region. While being the most ambitious of the projects mentioned so far, the RSC has the greatest potential to build security collaboration among regional states. It will also require the most work among all those initiatives to meet its objectives. A military integration initiative of this magnitude, while having received support from past US administrations, has not been pursued since 1983. The role and bipartisan commitment of the US is a key variable in its success.

As part of CENTCOM's transition from active military engagement to a focus on promoting regional security, the RSC aims to create a framework that, over time, integrates regional air and missile defence, intelligence-sharing, maritime security operations, crisis response and counterterrorism operations among US regional partners.²⁵⁹ To enable this transition, CENTCOM has been required to transform its level of regional engagement to what is described as 'partnership over posture'.²⁶⁰ The RSC intends to implement a phased integration of Israeli and Arab systems and personnel via regular convening.

This investment in collective regional security is not new. The US government has, since the 1991 Gulf War, made similar efforts to support a regional security architecture for the Middle East.²⁶¹ Most recently, the Trump administration tried – and failed – to rally regional support for its Middle East Security Architecture (MESA) project.²⁶² MESA and previous such projects all ended in failure largely because partner states were primarily interested in forging stronger bilateral ties with the US. Competing regional dynamics also meant that those partners could not align their objectives. The RSC, however, is the first time that such a detailed strategy has been proposed. The RSC differs from MESA in that there is greater bipartisan support for this initiative in Washington, with awareness that 'drawing down in the region requires investment in a regional security construct'.²⁶³ However, achieving the vision will prove difficult, not least because 'resources are more stretched and American partners are even more anxious'.²⁶⁴ In the US, the bureaucratic process is also seen as a hindrance in the Middle East.²⁶⁵

CENTCOM has itself acknowledged that Israel's broader regional engagement, a move that was also made possible by Trump's decision to place Israel under the purview of CENTCOM, has helped to facilitate this transition.²⁶⁶ R. Clarke Cooper, the US State Department's top official for foreign military transfers under the

²⁵⁹ Donegan, K. et al. (2021), 'Biden's Middle East Trip: What It Means And What's Next', Middle East Institute, 21 July 2021, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/bidens-middle-east-trip-what-it-means-and-whats-next>.

²⁶⁰ US Department of State (2022), 'Special Briefing via Telephone with Lt. Gen. Alexis G. Grynkeiwich AFCENT Commander', special briefing, 28 August 2022, <https://www.state.gov/special-briefing-via-telephone-with-lt-gen-alexus-g-grynkeiwich-afcent-commander>.

²⁶¹ Pollack, K. (2012), 'Security Dynamics in the Middle East', Brookings On The Record blog, 2 July 2012, <https://www.brookings.edu/on-the-record/security-dynamics-in-the-middle-east>.

²⁶² Donegan et al. (2021), 'Biden's Middle East Trip'.

²⁶³ Interview, 17 July 2022.

²⁶⁴ Interview, 12 July 2022.

²⁶⁵ Interview, 13 October 2022.

²⁶⁶ Szuba, J. (2021), 'Trump orders US Central Command to include Israel amid strategic shift', Al-Monitor, 15 January 2021, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2021/01/israel-centcom-iran-trump.html>.

Trump administration, confirmed the broader objective related to that move as an attempt to ‘enable Middle Eastern militaries to become interoperable with the United States as well as with each other’.²⁶⁷

It is important to stress that CENTCOM is not offering regional states a US alliance, nor are regional states willing yet to join a formal defence pact against the common threat of Iran. Also, it must be acknowledged that the RSC development process requires procedural, technical and integration phases that need ‘long-term work and cooperation through training, exercises, equipment, authorities, and doctrine... and truly is a heavy lift’.²⁶⁸ One interviewee cautioned that this process will be at least a decade in the making and by no means can be achieved in lightning speed.²⁶⁹ Above all, trust is needed to bring competing partners together. Considering these challenges, it appears difficult to see how such an initiative can get off the ground. Cooperation at that level, however, is of critical importance to US geopolitical and regional interests.

The first phase of the process requires broad alignment among participants on the nature of regional threats. A coordinated threat assessment is particularly challenging and has never been achieved among regional partners. But it is an essential step to building consensus on the regional environment. While the RSC could easily appear to be an anti-Iran alliance, regional states have yet to align their thinking – and will probably not – on how to manage Iran’s destabilizing regional influence. Many regional states would moreover refuse to join if the anti-Iran posture was explicit, to maintain their independent approach. In fact, Anwar Gargash, the diplomatic adviser to the UAE president, stated in July 2022 that ‘Abu Dhabi doesn’t support a regional alliance to confront Iran’.²⁷⁰ For this reason, regional states are cautious in the public domain to avoid association with an overtly anti-Iranian pact.

The second, more technical phase will concentrate on linking capacity including radars and satellites to prepare for the final, and most challenging, phase of interoperability.²⁷¹ This second phase will require states to prepare for system link-ups. This stage will likely also prove challenging because states have been procuring defence systems from a range of partners, including China, Europe and the US, that therefore cannot be immediately synchronized. Regional states also have diverse capabilities and competing systems that cannot be easily reconciled. For interoperability to be achieved, new technology must be developed to bring states together. Regional states that have already invested in defence systems will be reluctant to upgrade before the lifespan of such investments ends.²⁷² The key to this process is to build a theatre for secure communications, joint training and operations.

For the RSC initiative to develop fully, time and regular engagement are imperative. One interviewee argued: ‘Because a structural surgery is needed to transform and upgrade security cooperation, it could take up to five years

²⁶⁷ Ibid.

²⁶⁸ Donegan et al. (2021), ‘Biden’s Middle East Trip’.

²⁶⁹ Interview, 18 July 2022.

²⁷⁰ Irish, J. (2022), ‘UAE working to send envoy to Iran, against anti-Iran axis, official says’, Reuters, 15 July 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/uae-working-send-envoy-iran-against-anti-iran-axis-official-2022-07-15>.

²⁷¹ Donegan et al. (2021), ‘Biden’s Middle East Trip’.

²⁷² Interview, 12 July 2022.

to bring the most aligned and agile states together.²⁷³ Bilateral meetings are to be complemented by two intra-regional conferences bringing together the GCC states, Egypt, Iraq and Jordan at the head-of-defence level. As noted, among the hardest tasks for participants will be to coordinate and align on the timing of this plan: as the same interviewee pointed out, '[i]t took NATO, the most powerful alliance on the planet, decades before it achieved it'.²⁷⁴

Normalization of ties with Israel has allowed for the formal military-to-military engagement with Arab states to begin. Biden's visit to Israel in July 2022 came with the signing of the Jerusalem Strategic Partnership Joint Declaration, a document that demonstrates the US's prioritization of Israel and support for its regional integration.²⁷⁵ The 'US sees Israel with its advanced systems as an asset in supporting the RSC,' stated one interviewee.²⁷⁶ The US convened a meeting with former head of CENTCOM General Frank MacKenzie in March 2022 in Sharm el-Sheikh that brought together Bahrain, Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the UAE.²⁷⁷ Previous lower-level meetings have been held at which participants discussed scenarios on how to detect and defend against air threats.

Since this initial phase, current CENTCOM commander General Michael Kurilla has shepherded the process forward with subsequent visits and investments. Through this ongoing engagement, RSC participants have been able to align on providing rapid notification regarding aerial threats, which can be done using computer or phone communication and maritime security to be led by the US Naval Forces Central Command (NAVCENT).²⁷⁸

The NAVCENT process is the most advanced to date, with the expectation that security cooperation in this domain will commence in the summer of 2023. Training and capacity-building to set up a new security initiative to patrol the Persian Gulf are well under way.²⁷⁹ However, the regional trust deficit has caused the air and missile defence process to stagnate, despite urgency and a shared threat from Iran. Sustained engagement, both between Arab states and with Israel, is needed to build confidence.

With many states including Kuwait, Oman, Qatar and Saudi Arabia having yet to normalize ties with Israel, major obstacles to the RSC still exist. While CENTCOM intends to play an intermediary role enabling formal defence cooperation, even the appearance of formal partnership with Israel is too high an obstacle for some Arab

²⁷³ Ibid.

²⁷⁴ Ibid.

²⁷⁵ The White House (2022), 'The Jerusalem U.S.-Israel Strategic Partnership Joint Declaration', press release, 14 July 2022, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2022/07/14/the-jerusalem-u-s-israel-strategic-partnership-joint-declaration>.

²⁷⁶ Interview, 26 July 2022.

²⁷⁷ Gordon, M. R. and Cloud, D. S. (2022), 'U.S. Held Secret Meeting With Israeli, Arab Military Chiefs to Counter Iran Air Threat', *Wall Street Journal*, 26 June 2022, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/u-s-held-secret-meeting-with-israeli-arab-military-chiefs-to-counter-iran-air-threat-11656235802>.

²⁷⁸ Donegan et al. (2021), 'Biden's Middle East Trip'.

²⁷⁹ US Department of Defense (2023), 'Dana Stroul, Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for the Middle East, and Senior Department of Defense Leaders Participating in the United States-Gulf Cooperation Council Working Group Meetings, Hold an Off-Camera, On-The-Record Briefing From Riyadh, Saudi Arabia', transcript, 13 February 2023, <https://www.defense.gov/News/Transcripts/Transcript/Article/3296875/dana-stroul-deputy-assistant-secretary-of-defense-for-the-middle-east-and-senio>.

countries. Above all, many regional states worry that the RSC will be seen solely as an anti-Iran alliance. But without the capacity to deter air and missile threats, regional states remain acutely vulnerable.

Another, but equally important, issue that complicates efforts to build the RSC is the trust deficit among GCC states. This deficit has so far continued to prevent GCC states from cooperating on intelligence-sharing, but the US network provided via CENTCOM would aim to bridge the gap. The US–GCC defence working group meetings held in February 2023 are one of the efforts aimed at correcting these dynamics with a step-by-step approach to regionalizing security.²⁸⁰ Despite the shift towards multilateral engagement, interviewees confirmed that GCC states still prefer to prioritize their bilateral relationships with Washington.²⁸¹ The UAE continues to push for integration with Bahrain and Israel as a first step. One policymaker suggested that, since relations between all three are normalized and are ready to go, the US should support that collaboration and be ready for other countries to join at a later stage.

Some countries in the region, including Saudi Arabia and the UAE, see their engagement in the RSC as an opportunity to upgrade bilateral defence cooperation to secure stronger defence relationships. Yet competition among GCC players, including the UAE and Saudi Arabia, is inhibiting progress. Participant states are also moving ahead at differing speeds. One interviewee indicated that ‘Kuwait and Bahrain were all in [to the RSC], while Qatar was proving difficult to read and Oman categorically not interested’.²⁸² These divergences could prove to be significant obstacles. Consistent US diplomatic engagement and leadership-level support are required to nurture and nudge these relationships along.

US–Emirati security matters

The UAE is seeking an upgraded bilateral strategic framework with the US that would highlight the former’s weight and influence in the MENA region. The broad goal would be to ‘develop a strategic framework that aligns not only on defence cooperation but also on climate, energy, China strategy and other challenges’.²⁸³ Such an agreement would also help insulate the bilateral relationship from the increasingly partisan nature of US politics. The demand for an upgraded strategic agreement points to the UAE’s continued security reliance on the US. Negotiations towards this agreement have already begun, with the UAE seeking the highest-level guarantees on security, alongside meaningful cooperation in the fields of climate change, science and technology.

Progress in the climate space was made in November 2022 with the signing of the Partnership for Accelerating Clean Energy (PACE), which aims to increase cooperation between the US and UAE towards ‘a goal of deploying 100 gigawatts

²⁸⁰ US Department of Defense (2023), ‘Readout of the New Round of U.S.–Gulf Cooperation Council Working Groups on Integrated Air and Missile Defense and Maritime Security’, press release, 14 February 2023, <https://www.defense.gov/News/Releases/Release/Article/3298553/readout-of-the-new-round-of-us-gulf-cooperation-council-working-groups-on-integ>.

²⁸¹ Interview, 24 January 2023.

²⁸² Interview, 17 July 2022.

²⁸³ Interview, 26 July 2022.

of clean energy by 2035.²⁸⁴ This partnership shows a diversification beyond defence and an important commitment in advance of the UAE's presidency of COP28 in November 2023.

US-Emirati relations on security matters have been close for more than 20 years, and successive administrations, with authorization from Congress, have sold the Emiratis sophisticated US weaponry, such as F-16 Fighting Falcon aircraft.²⁸⁵ The US and UAE established a 'Defence Cooperation Framework' to develop joint approaches to regional conflicts and to promote interoperability. These processes built on the 1994 bilateral Defence Cooperation Agreement, the text of which is classified.²⁸⁶

The UAE's sustained cooperation with the US in the field of defence over the past two decades has enabled it to project power across the region.

The UAE's sustained cooperation with the US in the field of defence over the past two decades has enabled it to project power across the region. Cooperation has included purchases of US arms, capacity-building, strategic planning, and joint drills and activities. The UAE's armed forces are small – numbering approximately 50,000 – but have gained experience and built capability since 2001 through participating in US-led military ground operations, including Somalia (1992), the Balkans (late 1990s), and Afghanistan (2003–14), as well as air operations in Libya (2011) and against ISIS in Syria (2014–15).²⁸⁷ The UAE joined the US-led International Maritime Security Construct security mission in the Gulf in 2019 in an effort to deter Iranian attacks on Gulf shipping.²⁸⁸

A deal signed with the US in January 2021 for the UAE to procure up to 50 F-35s and 18 Reaper drones has been reviewed by the Biden administration,²⁸⁹ and the process of finalizing the sale has been delayed over US concerns that the UAE could purchase the F-35 and its technology from rival powers – notably China, with which the UAE enjoys growing relations.²⁹⁰ As the negotiation process for an expanded strategic framework continues, it remains to be seen if the UAE can obtain the security guarantees it is seeking. 'While they are seeking a South Korean-like defence pact with Washington or a Taiwanese commitment, it is hard to see the US making such a commitment and obtaining Congressional

²⁸⁴ US Department of State (2022), 'U.S.-UAE Signing of the Partnership for Accelerating Clean Energy', <https://www.state.gov/u-s-uae-signing-of-the-partnership-for-accelerating-clean-energy>.

²⁸⁵ Rumley, G. (2022), 'Unpacking the UAE F-35 Negotiations', The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, PolicyWatch 3578, 15 February 2022, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/unpacking-uae-f-35-negotiations>.

²⁸⁶ Sharp, J. M. (2022), *The United Arab Emirates (UAE): Issues for U.S. Policy*, report, Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 17 August 2022, <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/RS/RS21852/143>.

²⁸⁷ Heller, C. (2019), 'Little Sparta's Big Ambitions: The Emirati Military Comes of Age', RealClear Defense, 17 September 2019, https://www.realcleardefense.com/articles/2019/09/17/little_spartas_big_ambitions_the_emirati_military_comes_of_age_114748.html.

²⁸⁸ The Defense Post (2019), 'UAE joins new US-led Persian Gulf maritime security mission', 19 September 2019, <https://www.thedefensepost.com/2019/09/19/uae-gulf-international-maritime-security-construct>.

²⁸⁹ Kilani, A. (2022), 'Turbulent Skies for Gulf F-35 Deals', Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington, 2 February 2022, <https://agsiw.org/turbulent-skies-for-gulf-f-35-deals>.

²⁹⁰ Sharp, J. M. (2023), *The United Arab Emirates (UAE): Issues for U.S. Policy*, report, Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 30 January 2023, <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/RS/RS21852>.

approval,' said one interviewee. As such, the UAE is seeking greater defence and capacity-building to confront drone and missile threats, including access to US-made Predator missiles and other assets that will provide early warning.²⁹¹ Against this backdrop, the Abraham Accords have created space for increased regional security and defence collaboration discussions to take place.²⁹²

The Red Sea

Given the importance of the Red Sea to global trade and individual countries' import and export activities, major powers including the US, the EU, China and Russia, as well as regional states, share an interest in securing the sea's maritime security.

According to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), global maritime trade volumes are expected to treble by 2050 owing to a rapidly expanding e-commerce industry and population growth.²⁹³ As such, securing access to, and protecting, critical waterways will remain a high priority for trading nations and a central feature of national security strategies. This has led many states to project power into the Red Sea arena through a variety of means, including establishing naval and military bases, lending diplomatic and political support, and providing budget assistance, infrastructure investment, training and development aid.

Maritime security is not restricted to protecting waterways, as it also encompasses protecting against a wider range of threats, such as inter-state conflict, piracy, illegal immigration, human trafficking, weapons and narcotics smuggling, terrorism and illegal fishing, and offsetting the effects of environmental catastrophes.

Given increasing threats to and global interest in the Red Sea, the US has begun to change its thinking about the strategic significance of the sub-region, taking steps to ensure it has oversight of the region. As a result, it established a new multinational taskforce in April 2022: Combined Task Force (CTF) 153 complements existing taskforces by dividing the geographic area under the CTF's purview to allow a dedicated taskforce to cover the Red Sea, Bab el-Mandeb and the Gulf of Aden.²⁹⁴

While the primary threat to be addressed by the CTF is Iranian weapons-smuggling, particularly to the Houthi movement in Yemen,²⁹⁵ Russia's intentions in the Red Sea arena will undoubtedly be on US minds as well. In fact, the US provided military facilities to Kenya and Somalia in the 1970s to counter the then-Soviet ambition

²⁹¹ Al-Ketbi, E. (2022), 'Prospects of UAE-US Relations in a New Strategic Environment', Emirates Policy Center, 22 April 2022, <https://epc.ae/en/details/scenario/prospects-of-uae-us-relations-in-a-new-strategic-environment>.
²⁹² Interview, 23 November 2022.

²⁹³ Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (2022), 'Ocean shipping and shipbuilding', <https://www.oecd.org/ocean/topics/ocean-shiping>.

²⁹⁴ Naval News (2022), 'CMF Establishes New Naval Task Force To Enhance Red Sea Security', 19 April 2022, <https://www.navalnews.com/naval-news/2022/04/cmf-establishes-new-naval-task-force-to-enhance-red-sea-security>.

²⁹⁵ Bowman, B., Brobst, R. and Montgomery, M. (2022), 'New Mideast task force can counter Iranian arms smuggling, but more capabilities are needed', Defense News, 9 May 2022, <https://www.defensenews.com/opinion/commentary/2022/05/09/new-mideast-task-force-can-counter-iranian-arms-smuggling-but-more-capabilities-are-needed>.

in Africa.²⁹⁶ Russian expansionary ambitions have once again become a pressing priority, not least because Russia has already begun embedding itself in the Mediterranean with a presence in both Libya and Syria.

Increasing multilateralism

The proliferation of multilateral security forums as described above highlights the vacuum of power in the Middle East, alongside the profound security concerns of regional states. Geopolitical tensions between China and Russia and the US, and the war in Ukraine, have aggravated problematic security dynamics in the region. With the US increasingly distracted by threats from elsewhere, these multilateral initiatives provide an opportunity for MENA states to directly manage regional challenges. The various summits and gatherings showcase a pattern of strategic flexibility where states are asserting their priorities and stepping up cooperation in areas of mutually aligned interest.²⁹⁷ One analyst described the dynamics as ‘using multiple alliances to minimize the scope of dangers coming from outside’.²⁹⁸ For the US, increased multilateralism in the Middle East is seen as positive. ‘There is an awareness in Washington that there is no one sustainable approach to address the array of threats ranging from human security, climate, Iran to others’, said one interviewee. The hope is that, over time, multilateral cooperation will ‘create a deliberate but incremental pathway for leaders and their societies to cooperate’.²⁹⁹

It is important to note that, unlike previous alignments seen after the Arab Spring uprisings, these groupings are not ideologically motivated but rather emerging via flexible avenues of cooperation that have been reinvigorated after the Abraham Accords. Despite displaying strategic or tactical differences in managing threats, regional states are also coming together to discuss a range of security challenges, which include climate change, food security, cybersecurity and political instability, among others.³⁰⁰ Many of these multilateral groupings are at an early stage and will require sustained investment if they are to provide cooperative security benefits. The Biden administration’s belated but necessary support for these initiatives is an important investment in regional security and could be a ‘game changer’ that can help the US take full advantage of the relations that have been built.³⁰¹

²⁹⁶ Ross, J. (1980), ‘U.S. Arms Accord With Somalia Alarms Rival Neighbor Kenya’, *Washington Post*, 20 October 1980, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1980/10/20/us-arms-accord-with-somalia-alarms-rival-neighbor-kenya/305c4e92-c49b-41c9-96aa-bd74e6af96c4>.

²⁹⁷ Interview, 26 February 2023.

²⁹⁸ Interview, 23 May 2022.

²⁹⁹ Interview, 5 August 2022.

³⁰⁰ Bassist (2022), ‘Negev Summit steering committee hatches plans in Bahrain’.

³⁰¹ Interview, 26 February 2023.

For a more formal structure to emerge from these efforts, the multiple convening initiatives would have to be combined with deliberate intention. Regional states have yet to coalesce around this goal. One interviewee stressed that ‘integration can only be achieved with leadership buy-in’.³⁰² It is also unclear if these new dynamics will become a permanent feature of Middle East regional politics. After a decade of tension and competition, regional states could make use of a common platform to upgrade their security cooperation to prepare for future cycles of tension with Iran. If successfully managed, the new dynamics could lead to a period of recalibration that breeds new alignments and security coordination across the region.

³⁰² Ibid.

07

How to leverage the Abraham Accords: Challenges and recommendations

This final chapter considers the challenges in not only maximizing the benefits of the Abraham Accords, but also ensuring their sustainability. The chapter also makes recommendations on how the accords can help to create a co-operative regional security framework.

This paper has shown how shifts in the regional and international landscape, particularly after a decade of conflict and COVID-19, have fostered increased regional cooperation and integration among Middle East states. The signing of the Abraham Accords in September 2020 has prompted an unprecedented groundswell of economic, bilateral and multilateral engagement between the signatory states. Such collaboration is a critical stepping-stone that can help to embed de-escalation, increase understanding between countries, reduce mistrust and, above all, promote local management of regional security. Moreover, the bridges being built by Israeli–Emirati normalization can, in time, be transformed into a collaborative regional security structure that can manage and mitigate conflict.

The accords have, despite initial criticism, proved durable and prompted significant economic and political progress. Yet it is important to draw attention to a series of interconnected challenges that could slow or spoil these positive regional dynamics.

The Iran problem

Tensions with Iran are a critical component of the Israeli–Emirati relationship. Unlike in past years, Iran’s obstructionist role is driving regional states to deepen their engagement. ‘Iran’s destabilizing regional activities is a common denominator for many MENA states that is forging cooperation’, argued one analyst.³⁰³ But, although both countries remain aligned in their broader view of Iran as a regional threat, tactical differences over how to contain Iran’s activities are apparent. While the UAE’s national security strategy remains focused on pushing back against regional disruptors, the UAE has shifted its approach to concentrate on developing defensive capacity. The return of the UAE’s ambassador, Saif Al Zaabi, to Tehran, despite continued provocations from Iran, is a clear illustration of the UAE’s changed position. One interviewee characterized the UAE’s approach as ‘a realistic one because in terms of security, the UAE knows that they are defenceless against Iran; the last thing they want is a confrontation with Tehran’.³⁰⁴ Emirati leaders are also concerned that any direct confrontation between Israel and Iran could impact the UAE’s economy and security, by prompting an increase in Iranian attacks across the Gulf. Given this desire to avoid antagonizing Iran, direct diplomacy, economic engagement and incentives will likely guide the UAE’s strategy for managing Iran, accompanying the broader strategy to build defensive capability.

The Israeli political establishment has been uncomfortable with the UAE’s diplomatic outreach to Iran and instead hopes to build a more united anti-Iran front. At the same time, Israeli interviewees acknowledged that Israel would not provide direct military support to defend the Persian Gulf. ‘There is alignment in threat perceptions but there are differences between defence and offence here’, reflected one policymaker. However, foreshadowing increased military cooperation and defensive capacity-building, Israel has fast-tracked military exports to the UAE since the accords, ‘with more in the pipeline to come’.³⁰⁵ With capacity-building still a work in progress, both sides continue publicly to demonstrate caution and signal a slower pace of strategic cooperation.

Iran’s dispatch of drones to support the Russian war effort in Ukraine has raised concern throughout the region, as well as prompting a heightened Western response through the imposition of further sanctions on Iran. Israel is also believed to have been behind a drone strike on a military facility in Isfahan.³⁰⁶ For Iran, the war in Ukraine is a testing ground for its capabilities that allows it to project further influence and show that sanctions and diplomatic isolation have failed to curb its technological advance. Iran also gains from increased economic and strategic support from Russia. In January 2023, reports indicated that Iran was to upgrade its air fleet and acquire 24 SU-35s from Russia.³⁰⁷ This acquisition would be Iran’s first major upgrade since 1990, foreshadowing the potential for further military cooperation between it and Russia. Other Middle East states are deeply concerned

³⁰³ Interview, 29 March 2022.

³⁰⁴ Interview, 17 April 2022

³⁰⁵ Interview, 2 November 2022.

³⁰⁶ Al Jazeera (2023), ‘Iran blames Israel for Isfahan drone attack’, 2 February 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/2/2/iran-blames-israel-for-isfahan-drone-attack>.

³⁰⁷ Czulda, R. (2023), ‘What Iran’s Purchase of Russian Jets Means for Regional Security’, Commentary, Stimson Center, 8 February 2023, <https://www.stimson.org/2023/what-irans-purchase-of-russian-jets-means-for-regional-security>.

by these ties and the potential for a deeper military partnership. At the same time, the Western criticism of Iran’s missile and drone programme is seen in the region as ‘better late than never’³⁰⁸ support for the threat faced by regional states.

From Iran’s perspective, normalization between Israel and the UAE was not unexpected. It has long been aware of, if not monitoring, the close, security-based cooperation between Israel and the Gulf Arab states. Iran sees Israeli–Arab normalization as a counter-offensive against its own regional influence. Perceiving Israel as trying to encircle it, Iran has tried to establish ‘red lines’, including limiting ‘Israel’s military presence in the Persian Gulf’.³⁰⁹ One analyst argued that ‘Tehran will do what it has always done and look at opportunistic threat management as a strategy. It will move slowly until it finds opportunities to pressure or gain leverage’.³¹⁰ As such, Iran has so far reacted to normalization by embracing dialogue over confrontation with Gulf Arab states, but it also continues to use the threat of instability through its proxies in Yemen or its ballistic missile programme to divide regional states. The visit of Iran’s Supreme National Security Council secretary, Admiral Ali Shamkhani, to the UAE in March 2023 sought to build on this approach of outreach and engagement. The announcement that month of Saudi–Iranian reconciliation might further reduce tension around the region, but time and confidence-building measures are needed for this rapprochement to impact other conflicts.³¹¹ The UAE’s engagement with the Assad regime in Syria is viewed through this prism. Rather than seeing restoration of ties as negative, Iran is pleased by the prospect of the re-legitimization of Assad, as his political survival would vindicate its support for Assad. Although Arab states normalizing with the Syrian regime believe that such a course will limit Iranian influence, Iran views the situation differently, believing its economy would benefit from any increase in Arab state investment in Syria.

Conversely, Iran also sees Israel and the UAE’s embrace of Turkey as directed towards a broader policy of encirclement.³¹² Turkish military activities in Azerbaijan, northern Iraq and Syria have led to increasing tensions between it and Iran. In the past, both sides have managed to compartmentalize points of contention in pursuit of economic ties. For the time being, Iran sees Erdogan’s domestic weaknesses ahead of the 2023 elections in Turkey as playing in its favour. Iran, like Israel and the UAE, will see a regional recalibration towards Turkey in a different light should Erdogan fail in his re-election bid. Until then, because trust in Erdogan is so limited and expectations remain high that he could still win re-election, Israeli and Emirati outreach to Turkey will remain limited and tactical.

Iran is conscious that Israel and other regional states, with their proximity to Iran’s borders or places of influence within them, have the potential to stoke dissent among the Iranian population. The outbreak of protests that began in September 2022 has seen Iran target the Kurdish autonomous region in northern Iraq with repeated missile and drone strikes. These strikes are designed to stem potential outside support for the protests that have spread throughout the country and

³⁰⁸ Interview, 12 December 2022.

³⁰⁹ Interview, 17 June 2022.

³¹⁰ Interview, 16 February 2022.

³¹¹ Reuters (2023), ‘Iran’s top security official to visit the UAE amid regional rapprochement’, 15 March 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/irans-top-security-official-shamkhani-visit-uae-2023-03-15>.

³¹² Interview, 5 May 2022.

to restore deterrence as a mechanism for control.³¹³ Iran has blamed external actors for fomenting the protests and, in another effort to push back against what it sees as outside interference, has increased its threatening rhetoric. Iran's IRGC commander, Hossein Salami, warned Saudi Arabia against further meddling and supporting diaspora-run opposition media, foreshadowing a possible acceleration of tensions. As part of the bilateral agreement between Iran and Saudi Arabia, both sides have committed to respect sovereignty and reduce regional interference. Following this agreement, regional states should take the opportunity to continue to build channels of dialogue and, in absence of Western-led efforts, to arrive at compromises and agree thematic areas of cooperation.

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With the revival of the JCPOA being far from certain and Iran's nuclear programme advancing to unprecedented levels, recent de-escalatory regional security dynamics should not be taken for granted. Israeli and Iranian 'grey zone' operations continue unabated, while the January 2023 US–Israel 'Juniper Oak' military exercises were intended to show the 'collective readiness and interoperability of forces as well demonstrate preparedness to confront threats'.³¹⁴ In this climate of accelerating nuclear tensions, limited direct diplomacy with Iran and global attention on the war in Ukraine, there is concern that escalation could happen quickly and further risk regional security.

In such a scenario, the Emirati relationships with both Israel and Iran could provide an opportunity, enabling the UAE to act as an important interlocutor that sets clear red lines and 'uses partnerships to send messages to Tehran'.³¹⁵ This would establish a new security paradigm in the region in which a major Arab state joins Israel in managing tensions with Iran. In the meantime, while tactical divergences between Israel and the UAE over Iran remain, and Western states have no clear future strategy beyond sanctions, the UAE has an opportunity to use its relationship with Iran to play an important diplomatic bridging role.

³¹³ Divsallar, A. (2022), 'The Military Dimension of Iran Protests', Washington, DC: Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington, 19 October 2022, <https://agsiw.org/the-military-dimension-of-iran-protests>.

³¹⁴ U.S. Embassy in Israel (2023), 'CENTCOM and Israel Defense Forces Conduct Exercise Juniper Oak 23.2', press release, 23 January 2023, <https://il.usembassy.gov/centcom-and-israel-defense-forces-conduct-exercise-juniper-oak-23-2>.

³¹⁵ Interview, 26 July 2022.

Palestinian matters

State nationalism has gained in import across the region – and particularly among the Gulf Arab states – and surpassed the appeal of pan-Arabism and pan-Islamism. Furthermore, regional leaders have expressed displeasure with the Palestinian leadership’s ‘failure’ to reach a peace deal with Israel or at least their continuous missing of opportunities. For example, leading Gulf Arab political figures, such as former Saudi ambassador to the US Bandar bin Sultan Al Saud, have openly criticized the Palestinian leadership and argued that it is no longer deserving of support.³¹⁶ But in the push for normalization, the Palestinian issue cannot be ignored. While it may no longer dominate Middle East affairs, the issue will remain divisive until Palestinian statehood is achieved.

It has become commonplace to read that younger generations in Arab states no longer attach the same significance to the Palestinian Territories as their predecessors,³¹⁷ and are more consumed with domestic matters such as jobs, housing and supporting families. However, surveys highlight the continued relevance of the Palestinian issue among all generations in Arab countries. For example, the majority of those surveyed for the 2019–20 Arab Opinion Index (about 80 per cent) considered the Palestinian cause to be relevant for all Arabs, and not Palestinians alone.³¹⁸

Given the heightened and prominent debate around colonialism not only within academia, but also in popular global discourse, the characterization of Israel as a ‘colonial state’ resonates strongly. Indeed, there is a discernible and palpable anti-imperialist (for which, read anti-US)³¹⁹ sentiment that attributes the region’s turmoil to US overreach in Afghanistan, Iraq and elsewhere. The same sentiment holds the UK first and the US second responsible for establishing, nurturing and supporting Israel. In fact, younger generations in the Middle East, as well as second- and third-generation migrants in North America and Europe, are arguably more engaged with Palestinian affairs.³²⁰ As a result, the issue has regained currency over the past decade.

As mentioned earlier in this paper, the Palestinian Territories and the sanctity of Jerusalem are still important issues for certain regional states, including Kuwait and Qatar. The latter has been the most vocal regional state in criticizing Israel’s wars against Gaza and also the most generous in helping rebuild that territory.³²¹

³¹⁶ Hilton, T. and Elkatouri, O. (2020), ‘Saudi Arabia’s Prince Bandar bin Sultan calls out Palestinian leaders over peace deal’, *AlArabiya News*, 5 October 2020, <https://english.alarabiya.net/features/2020/10/05/Saudi-Arabia-s-Prince-Bandar-bin-Sultan-calls-out-Palestinian-leaders-over-peace-deal>.

³¹⁷ Brookings Institution (2020), ‘Palestine and the Arab World: A relationship in crisis?’, Brookings Events, 27 August 2020, <https://www.brookings.edu/events/palestine-and-the-arab-world-a-relationship-in-crisis>.

³¹⁸ Arab Center Washington DC (2020), ‘The 2019-2020 Arab Opinion Index: Main Results in Brief’, 16 November 2020, <https://arabcenterdc.org/resource/the-2019-2020-arab-opinion-index-main-results-in-brief>.

³¹⁹ According to the 2019–20 Arab Opinion Index, 29 per cent of respondents perceived the US to pose the greatest threat to Arab countries.

³²⁰ An example of influential second- and third-generation migrants engaged with the Palestinian issue is the International Centre of Justice for Palestinians. See International Centre of Justice for Palestinians (undated), <https://www.icjpalastine.com>.

³²¹ Reuters (2021), ‘Palestinian Authority withdraws from Qatar funding scheme for Gaza – Qatari envoy’, 10 September 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/pa-withdraws-qatar-funding-scheme-gaza-qatari-envoy-says-2021-09-10>.

The UAE, meanwhile, has created a dilemma for itself on this issue. Its full embrace of the Abraham Accords was considered by Palestinians in Gaza and the West Bank to be a betrayal of their cause.³²² Recent polls of Palestinians in Gaza and the West Bank indicate that only six per cent favoured normalization with Israel; and only five per cent of Egyptians and Jordanians support peace with Israel.³²³ Furthermore, UAE's influence among Palestinians has already been suffering, because it views Hamas as an enemy and severed ties with the PA some years ago as a result. The PA – and especially its president, Mahmoud Abbas, and his supporters – have never made their peace with MbZ's efforts to promote Abbas's rival Mohammed Dahlan, whom they believe has influenced the UAE's decision to normalize.³²⁴

Recent polls of Palestinians in Gaza and the West Bank indicate that only six per cent favoured normalization with Israel; and only five per cent of Egyptians and Jordanians support peace with Israel.

Conflict between Israel and Palestinians living in the West Bank and Gaza is a recurring event. Consequently, the UAE could become the target of Arab anger if it is unable to distance itself from Israel's actions, which have become more hostile under the new, ultra-right Netanyahu government. For example, national security minister Itamar Ben-Gvir's provocative visit to Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif in January 2023 – reminiscent of late Israeli prime minister Ariel Sharon's visit in September 2000 – brought widespread condemnation among Arab leaders. Moreover, calls from finance minister Bezalel Smotrich (also the minister in the defence ministry in charge of civilian affairs in the West Bank) in March 2023 for Israel to 'wipe out' the Palestinian town of Huwara in the West Bank following the killing of two Israelis will only serve to complicate relations.

While the Israel–UAE relationship will likely survive periodic increases in violence, it is unclear how it could withstand Israel's annexation of parts of the West Bank or a new intifada. At the very least, the partnership would come under extreme pressure and the UAE would be forced to put it into 'deep freeze'. The UAE would also rely on the US to manage tensions between Israel and Arab states over the Palestinian Territories and rein-in provocative Israeli actions in the West Bank and Gaza. Such pressures would not create a domestic fissure in the compact between the UAE's state and society or lead to mass protests, but it would affect the UAE's reputation in the region and could have a material impact on its relationships with other Arab states. High-level diplomatic visits, akin to AbZ's visit to Israel, would be unlikely to be repeated. A visit by Netanyahu to Abu Dhabi, planned for January 2023, has already been delayed. In this context, ultra-right-wing Israeli politicians

³²² Holmes, O., Balousha, H., Safi, M. and McKernan, B. (2020), 'We feel betrayed': Palestinians fear cost of Arab states' deals with Israel', *Guardian*, 20 September 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/sep/22/we-feel-betrayed-palestinians-fear-cost-of-arab-states-deals-with-israel>.

³²³ Robbins, M. (2022), *Public Views of the U.S.-China Competition in MENA*, Arab Barometer, July 2022, https://www.arabbarometer.org/wp-content/uploads/ABVII_US-China_Report-EN-1.pdf?ct=t.

³²⁴ Guzansky, Y. and Michael, K. (2020), 'The Emerging Abraham Accords: The Challenges of Positive Change', Washington, DC: Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 25 September 2020, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/emerging-abraham-accords-challenges-positive-change>.

must weigh the value of increased regional integration against their desire for territorial expansion that would undoubtedly provoke regional opposition and end any prospect of expanding the Abraham Accords.

Expanding the Abraham Accords

To date, normalization with other, major Arab countries has not followed the Abraham Accords. Progress on this will be key to achieving the broader Israeli goal of overt regional coordination. Israeli policymakers have long been courting the Saudi leadership, seeing normalization with Saudi Arabia as the ‘big ticket’.³²⁵ Recent statements from Israeli foreign minister Eli Cohen have indicated that, for Israel, expansion of the accords is a matter of ‘when’ not ‘if’.³²⁶ However, while it is broadly supportive of the accords, Saudi Arabia has yet to take steps to formally join.

Informal, intelligence-based engagement between Israel and Saudi Arabia has been happening quietly for decades, primarily directed towards managing mutual regional threats.³²⁷ MbS is believed to be more inclined to normalize ties with Israel than his father, King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud, but has made progress on Palestinian statehood a condition of any such step. ‘As custodians of the two Holy Mosques, the kingdom has a bigger regional role and responsibility that must be recognized... thereby normalization will require a clear quid pro quo’, stated one interviewee.³²⁸

Like the UAE, Saudi Arabia has been deeply frustrated by US geopolitical prioritization over regional security commitments. These sentiments have been deepened by the war in Ukraine, which has led to a growing divide between Saudi Arabia and the US. Biden’s July 2021 visit to Israel and Saudi Arabia was an attempt to demonstrate his administration’s endorsement of regional integration.³²⁹ This enabled greater formal cooperation, including Saudi participation in the RSC.

As part of a behind-the-scenes negotiation, the Biden administration has been supporting efforts to bring Israel and Saudi Arabia closer together. In July 2022 Saudi Arabia agreed to allow civilian overflights from Israel through Saudi airspace. Under the agreement, Israeli Arabs will also be permitted to fly directly to Saudi Arabia for the *Hajj* religious pilgrimage, rather than entering Saudi Arabia via Jordan.³³⁰ A third part of the agreement saw the transfer of sovereignty over the Tiran and Sanafir islands in the Red Sea from Egypt to Saudi Arabia.³³¹ Beyond this,

³²⁵ Interview, 21 March 2022.

³²⁶ Ynetnews (2023), ‘Eli Cohen sees ‘Abraham Accords’ summit in Morocco in March’, 2 January 2023, <https://www.ynetnews.com/article/sk0rcpgci>.

³²⁷ Riedel, B. (2022), ‘How to understand Israel and Saudi Arabia’s secretive relationship’, Brookings Order from Chaos blog, 11 July 2022, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2022/07/11/how-to-understand-israel-and-saudi-arabias-secretive-relationship>.

³²⁸ Interview, 12 December 2021.

³²⁹ Magid, J. (2022), ‘Biden says he’ll aim to ‘deepen Israel’s integration in region’ during visit’, *Times of Israel*, 30 June 2022, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/biden-says-hell-aim-to-deepen-israel-integration-in-region-during-visit>.

³³⁰ Interview, 22 April 2022.

³³¹ Schwartz, F. (2022), ‘Hajj flights from Israel to Saudi Arabia included in talks to improve ties’, *Financial Times*, 27 June 2022, <https://www.ft.com/content/0ec338ba-d73c-464a-9caf-5d4f3dc6d711>.

Saudi Arabia is linking normalization to security guarantees from the US, along with support for a Saudi civilian nuclear programme. The latter could be difficult for Israel to accept.³³²

Together, these steps and the discussion around them signify positive momentum. But, as one analyst suggested, Saudi Arabia, ‘when it is ready, will not likely sign onto the Abraham Accords with its smaller neighbours. Its size and stature suggest that it will need its own deal with Israel and one that showcases its influence’.³³³ For the time being, as the Israeli government faces a domestic political crisis and as tensions with the Palestinians rise, the momentum behind normalization has reduced. Saudi Arabia’s minister of state, Adel al-Jubeir, further commented that ‘peace comes at the end of this process, not at the beginning’.³³⁴

Other Gulf Arab states including Oman and Qatar have – despite their long-standing quiet engagement with Israel – also declined formal normalization. Qatari cooperation is seen by Israel as valuable in managing ties with Hamas, while Israeli participation in the Oman-based Middle East Desalination Research Center has been ongoing for over two decades. However, secret talks between Israel and Qatar to increase Israel’s diplomatic presence in Doha during the 2022 football World Cup fell apart over the Israeli insistence on making public a planned conversation between then Israeli prime minister Lapid and Qatari emir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani.³³⁵ After delays that also saw the Omani Shura Council propose to expand legislation that would ban contact with Israeli entities and individuals, originally proposed in 1972, Oman agreed to open its airspace to Israeli flights in February 2023. The decision ultimately reveals the progress under way within the region towards Israel’s integration, but also demonstrates the domestic and regional sensitivities that require mediation and management.

Addressing asymmetries

Normalization agreements have cemented ties between Israel and the UAE, and their new relationship is here to stay. But ebbs and flows to their relationship should be expected. Pressure points and challenging regional scenarios, including a new Israeli conflict with the Palestinians or a flare-up of tensions with Iran, are likely to cause public disagreement. As with Israel’s recent tensions with Egypt and Jordan attest, regional crises could also lead to a deterioration in relations.

While not posing an obstacle to the top-level relationship between government and business leaders, political and cultural asymmetries between Israel and the UAE have yet to reach the people-to-people level. For example, Emirati openness to the Abraham Accords has also not yet translated to an increase in the number of UAE citizens travelling to Israel. More work needs to be done to build stronger

³³² Nissenbaum, N. Leiber, D. and Kalin, S. (2023), ‘Saudi Arabia Seeks US Security Pledges, Nuclear Help for Peace with Israel’, *Wall Street Journal*, 9 March 2023, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/saudi-arabia-seeks-u-s-security-pledges-nuclear-help-for-peace-with-israel-cd47baaf>.

³³³ Interview, 12 November 2022.

³³⁴ Magid, J. (2022), ‘Saudi minister: Peace with Israel ‘strategic option’ but not before 2-state solution’, *Times of Israel*, 16 July 2022, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/saudi-official-peace-with-israel-strategic-option-but-not-before-2-state-solution>.

³³⁵ Azriel, G. (2022), ‘Exclusive: Qatar-Israel talks fail over Israeli demand to go public’, *i24 News*, 31 August 2022, <https://www.i24news.tv/en/news/israel/sport/1661941110-exclusive-qatar-israel-talks-fail-over-israeli-demand-to-go-public>.

relationships at population level and to improve public perceptions of Israel across the region. Political steps to reinvigorate Israeli–Palestinian talks could perhaps shift negative perceptions. Without Israeli progress on Palestine, people-to-people contact between Israel and Arab countries will not flourish.

It is also worth noting that the Israeli and Emirati political systems continue to operate at different paces. The civil society and media landscapes in both countries are not in alignment. One example of potential sources of tension emerged April 2021 when an Israeli woman, Fidaa Kiwan, was arrested and sentenced to death in the UAE for drug possession.³³⁶ In March 2023, she was fully pardoned in what Israel described as a ‘special gesture’.³³⁷ Trust and cultural understanding will take time to develop, but are essential components of stronger economic and security partnerships.

Geopolitics and the US dimension

The Middle East since the signing of the Abraham Accords is experiencing an important period of transition that offers agency, activism and opportunities. However, the transition comes also with friction. The war in Ukraine has become an added challenge and complication for MENA states. With geopolitical competition accelerating, those states have been trying to navigate a weakened but still influential Russia and US–China polarization. The US and Europe regard support for Ukraine as a democratic necessity and have been deeply disappointed by the unwillingness of Middle East partners to take sides. Reflecting the gaps, MENA states too have been equally discouraged by the US’s prompt actions to support Ukraine compared to the US response to their Iran-related security challenges.

The Middle East regional environment is also beset with its own specific challenges that include not only Iran, but uncertainty in Yemen due to the collapse of the March 2022 ceasefire and wider concerns over food and supply-chain insecurity.

While Russia’s forces in Ukraine have not lived up to expectations in terms of its success, regional states have continued to hedge their bets. Iran’s close ties with Russia – evidenced by sales of drones to Moscow and stronger economic and security cooperation – confirms the view that Iran will continue its destabilizing regional role. Further sanctions and attempts by the EU, the UK and the US to contain Iran are supported by Israel, the UAE and other US partners in the region, but such actions do not provide immediate security solutions. Regional competition within the GCC continues to impede crisis management.

The poorly managed OPEC+ announcement of cuts to oil production in October 2022 shows that, despite President Biden’s visit to the region, differences with the US still exist. Regional states are putting their national and economic priorities first.³³⁸ Reflecting the limits of the US position in the region, MbZ’s October 2022

³³⁶ *Times of Israel* (2022), ‘UAE court hands Israeli woman life imprisonment after death sentence struck down’, 7 July 2022, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/uae-court-hands-israeli-woman-life-imprisonment-after-death-sentence-struck-down>.

³³⁷ Rodrigues, C. A. (2023), ‘UAE pardons Israeli woman who faced life in prison’, BBC News, 26 March 2023, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-65080918>.amp.

³³⁸ Elhamy, A. and Abd-Alaziz, M. (2022), ‘Saudi Arabia, United States clash over reason for OPEC+ oil cut’, Reuters, 13 October 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/business/energy/saudi-arabia-rejects-statements-critical-opec-oil-cut-2022-10-12>.

visit to Russia shows that the UAE is prepared to follow a nuanced but assertive foreign policy.³³⁹ In this context, the maintenance of ties with Russia is seen as a useful way of checking Iran’s regional adventurism.

While the US is equally frustrated that its efforts are being unacknowledged, it should heed the grievances of regional partners such as the UAE and provide sustained diplomatic engagement to broaden and build regional diplomatic and security cooperation.

At the same time, regional states are ever more aware that close relations with the US are the only security guarantee on offer. In the post-COVID-19 era, China remains inward-looking and uninterested in Middle East adventures. With the US and China seemingly set for a long-running geopolitical confrontation, MENA states are keen to avoid being caught in the middle. The multitude of comprehensive strategic partnerships signed between regional states and China has not yet translated into a stronger strategic interest on the latter’s part, leaving states still reliant on the US for support on regional security. China’s role in the 2023 Iran–Saudi reconciliation deal will not lead to an immediate Chinese security role in the region.

In absence of any regional resolution to the threat of Iran, or progress in US talks over rejoining the JCPOA, both the role of the US and the bipartisan nature of US engagement continue to be critical for its regional partners. Interviewees repeatedly mentioned that consistent, aligned US support is needed to bring all countries and their leaderships together.

The Biden administration eventually adopted this way of thinking and now supports normalization. In a marked shift away from military deployment, the US is seeking to enhance its position through broader regional engagement and economic and security-based bilateral partnerships. The CENTCOM-led RSC is a unique opportunity for regional states to cooperate on intelligence-sharing and, over time, build up to technology- and systems-integration to manage missile and drone threats. But consistent and deliberate US investment over an extended period is needed to achieve that goal. As one interviewee stressed, ‘the US should not aim too high from the beginning. Lower-level collaboration and cooperation can build up to greater integration’.³⁴⁰

The US establishment has come to see an ‘enhanced defence architecture stitched by multiple conversations and frameworks as better than what the US can do on its own’.³⁴¹ This strategy certainly reduces the burden on the US to manage a singular dialogue, but also lends support to regional processes and allows for CENTCOM to develop a broader RSC. However, there is no guarantee that this initiative will come to fruition and the RSC cannot be seen as a remedy for dealing with Iran’s nuclear programme or its regional activism.

With no short- or medium-term security solutions in sight to manage regional stability challenges, the US remains the essential security partner behind the Abraham Accords and the broader multilateral processes under way in the Middle

³³⁹ Reuters (2022), ‘UAE president’s visit to Russia to help reach ‘solutions’ to Ukrainian crisis - ministry’, 10 October 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/uae-presidents-visit-russia-help-reach-solutions-ukrainian-crisis-ministry-2022-10-10>.

³⁴⁰ Interview, 16 February 2023.

³⁴¹ Interview, 26 July 2022.

East. For the region to benefit, and for the international community capitalize on the potential for regional transformation, deeper consistent alignment, coordination and support are urgently needed from the US government and from its European partners (including the UK). Moreover, this support must be bipartisan and cross-institutional. Regional states, recognizing the changed geopolitical landscape, also bear responsibility to work collaboratively. Without such deliberate efforts by all stakeholders, the current de-escalatory dynamic could easily unravel and the opportunity to shape a new Middle East will be lost.

Abbreviations and acronyms

AbZ	UAE foreign minister Abdullah bin Zayed Al Nahyan
AFRICOM	United States Africa Command
AI	artificial intelligence
API	Arab Peace Initiative
CENTCOM	United States Central Command
CTF	Combined Task Force
C-UAS	counter-unmanned aircraft system
EAPC	Europe Asia Pipeline Company
EUCOM	United States European Command
FTA	free-trade agreement
GCC	Gulf Cooperation Council
GDP	gross domestic product
GSPI	Global Soft Power Index
IAI	Israel Aerospace Industries
IDF	Israel Defense Forces
IME	International Maritime Exercise
INDOPACOM	United States Indo-Pacific Command
ISIS	Islamic State
ISR	intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance
JCPOA	Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action
MbS	Saudi crown prince and prime minister Muhammad bin Salman Al Saud
MbZ	UAE president Muhammad bin Zayed Al Nahyan
MENA	Middle East and North Africa
MESA	Middle East Security Architecture
MoU	memorandums of understanding
MW	megawatts
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NAVCENT	United States Naval Forces Central Command
NSS	United States National Security Strategy
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
PA	Palestinian Authority
PACE	Partnership for Accelerating Clean Energy
RSC	regional security construct
SHORAD	short-range air defence
SPYDER	‘Surface-to-air PYthon and DERby’
STC	Southern Transitional Council
UAE	United Arab Emirates
USV(s)	unmanned surface vessel(s)

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Cover image: Flags of the US, Israel, the UAE and Bahrain projected onto the walls of the Old City of Jerusalem after the signing of the Abraham Accords, 15 September 2020.

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