

Shifting Politics Between Muslim States & Israel: From the Khartoum Declaration to the Abraham Accords

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Abstract

The Israel-Palestine conflict has long hindered diplomatic ties between Israel and many Arab and Muslim countries. However, a significant shift occurred in 1979, when Egypt normalised relations, followed by Jordan in 1994 and the Abraham Accords in 2020. These normalisation efforts signal a move from pan-Arab stance against Israel, based on the 1967 Khartoum Declaration, to a regional partnership driven by Arab states' national interests. Despite establishing diplomatic relations, the need to achieve lasting stability and peace in the region necessitates addressing the Israel-Palestine issue comprehensively. The existence of an independent Palestinian state alongside Israel, ensuring safety for both Palestinians and Jews, is crucial. This imperative has become even more apparent in the 2023 Israel-Hamas war. Any renewed normalisation efforts between Arab states and Israel should learn from the precedents set in earlier waves of normalisation, but prioritising a better solution for the Israel-Palestine conflict is essential for the stability and peace in the Middle East.

Keywords: Khartoum Declaration, Abraham Accords, Israel-Palestine conflict, Israel-Hamas war, Middle East

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Introduction

In 1971, the inaugural president of the United Arab Emirates (UAE) characterised Israel as a formidable adversary, emphasising the imperative for Arab nations to safeguard themselves against the perceived threats posed by Zionism.² However, a seismic shift occurred in September 2020, when the UAE took a ground-breaking step, establishing fully-fledged diplomatic relations with the state of Israel. Notably, ongoing discussions now revolve around the potential normalisation of relations between Saudi Arabia and Israel. These transformative developments in the Middle East mark a departure from the historically strained relations between Muslim-majority states and Israel.

What factors have propelled these Gulf nations, once critical of the state, to acknowledge Israel as a regional collaborator now? Amidst the enduring Israel-Palestine conflict, with unresolved issues such as Palestinian statehood intensifying tensions, what motivations underpin the pursuit of amicable relations with Israel? To comprehensively address these questions, it is essential to delve into the trajectory of Arab nations' relations with Israel since its declaration of statehood in 1948, an epochal event that reverberated across the Middle East.

Throughout history, most Arab nations have staunchly opposed the establishment of the state of Israel, viewing it as a fundamental infringement upon Palestinian sovereignty and rights. This sentiment led countries such as Syria, Egypt, the then-Transjordan, and Iraq³ to mobilise their armed forces, driven by the goal of thwarting Israel's emergence and supporting Palestinian resistance. The height of Arab nationalism, particularly pan-Arabism, occurred from the mid-1950s to the 1967 Arab-Israeli war.⁴ The 1967 Khartoum Declaration encapsulated the unified Arab

² Ulrichsen 2016: 3

³ Morris 2008: 77; Kumaraswamy, 2009

⁴ Bishku 1998: 45.

rejection of Israel and its territorial gains, establishing a collective stance against normalising relations with the country.⁵

This collective response to Israel's establishment culminated in military clashes and confrontations between Israel and the Arab states. The Arab-Israeli War of 1948-49, alternatively known as the War of Independence or the Nakba,⁶ changed the region's geopolitical landscape. The conflict resulted in the displacement and dispossession of hundreds of thousands of Palestinians, leading to a substantial Palestinian refugee population.

These conflicts triggered significant political transformations in the Middle East, fostering solidarity among Arab countries against Israel and strengthening a sense of Arab identity. The aftermath of the 1948 war set the stage for subsequent disputes and diplomatic discussions, profoundly impacting the Middle East's history and shaping the perspectives of Muslim states for decades.

The normalisation of relations between Egypt and Israel in 1979 marked a turning point in Middle Eastern diplomacy. Egypt's decision to peacefully coexist with Israel diverged from the Arab coalition against it. Building on this precedent, Jordan became the next Arab nation to establish diplomatic ties with Israel in 1994. Over almost three decades, the Middle East experienced a substantial transformation, with the UAE, Bahrain, and Morocco establishing fully-fledged diplomatic connections with Israel in 2020. These successive diplomatic normalisation efforts reflect the region's evolving dynamics and the gradual reconsideration of conventional positions toward Israel.

This paper examines this shift in the relations between Arab states and Israel from the aftermath of the 1948-49 Arab-Israeli War to the present, focusing on factors influencing the normalisation of relations. It divides the normalisation process into two waves: the first, from 1979 to 2000, reviews peace treaties between Israel and Egypt, Jordan, and other

⁵ Khartoum Resolution 1967

⁶ It means "catastrophe" in Arabic

developments, while the second includes the 2020 Abraham Accords and ongoing discussions about Saudi Arabia on normalising relations with Israel.

The analysis entails an examination of Arab countries that have normalised relations with Israel, probing into their strategic imperatives, foreign policy orientations, and the key events that have led to or influenced the forming of diplomatic ties. By doing so, it delves into the evolutionary dynamics of relationships between these states and Israel. The paper argues that, for countries which have normalised relations with Israel, their national interests – such as sovereign identity, security, and economic growth – may have taken priority over the pan-Arab stance against Israel that was enshrined in the Khartoum Declaration.

The paper further explores the implications for Palestine within the context of the evolving relations between Arab states and Israel. It raises a crucial question about whether the 2023 Israel-Hamas war, initiated on October 7, and the persistent Israeli-Palestinian conflict remain substantial factors shaping regional relationships and potentially exerting influence on the ongoing normalisation process.

This paper limits its study to Arab countries which have either normalised or are in the process of normalising formal diplomatic relations with Israel. While recognising the impact of broader regional dynamics and relationships amongst the other Arab countries and stakeholders of the Middle East region, the analysis only pays attention to factors and events that influenced the Muslim states, such as Egypt, Jordan, UAE, Bahrain, and Morocco, to normalise relations with Israel.

It briefly covers some domestic politics and concerns but avoids detailed exploration of issues such as the formation of national identity, domestic politics, and foreign policy decision-making. In doing so, the paper maintains the core objective of studying the normalisation patterns across waves of normalisation to lay the groundwork for further research on the normalisation of Arab and Muslim states towards Israel. In this regard, the paper concludes with a proposed path for future relations between Muslim countries and Israel.

First Wave of Normalisation: Arab-Israeli War to Oslo Accords

Egypt's Relations with Israel

In 1948, Egypt entered the Arab-Israeli conflict during a transitional phase towards independence and establishing its political identity. The developments in Egypt leading to the normalisation of relations with Israel in 1979 were intricately linked to domestic and regional context. Egypt's alignment with Arab nationalism, not prominent in the 1930s, focused on asserting a distinct national identity and gaining independence from British influence. Key milestones included the Wafd Party's rise to power in 1936, the signing of the Anglo-Egyptian Treaty, and hosting British forces during World War II, and the subsequent increase in post-war nationalist activities.⁷

In an Egyptian parliament meeting in April 1948, then-Prime Minister Mahmoud El-Nokrashy declared that he would not allow the Egyptian army to go to Palestine. There was a division over this matter, but eventually, there was a change in decision, and Egypt joined the Arab armies in the battle against Israel.⁸

The Arab-Israeli war in 1948-49 resulted in territorial losses for Arab nations, including Egypt. Egypt's performance in this war bruised national pride.⁹ Many Egyptians felt disappointed and frustrated during and after the conflict. The Egypt-Israel Armistice Agreement in 1949, facilitated mainly by the United Nations, ended active military engagements between Egypt and Israel, halted hostilities, and established stability in the region.

The subsequent years witnessed a notable shift as Arab nationalism gained prominence in Egypt. Then-President Gamal Abdel Nasser became a champion of Arab nationalism and pan-Arabism,

⁷ Bishku, 1998: 45; Botman, 1991: 32-39, 50

⁸ Heikal, 1988: 114-117.

⁹ Selma Botman, 1991: 50

advocating for Arab unity and independence from foreign influence through the 1950s and 1960s.¹⁰ Nasser was a vocal critic of Israel and adopted a staunch anti-Israel stance.

Against this backdrop, the 1967 Six-Day War unfolded, involving Israel and several Arab states, including Egypt, Jordan, and Syria. The aftermath of the war posed significant challenges for Egypt. It lost control of the Sinai Peninsula, faced disarray in its armed forces, and endured severe economic setbacks. Internally, signs of social and economic distress became apparent. These developments led to a regional balance of power transformation, giving rise to new political realities.

When Anwar al-Sadat assumed the presidency in 1970, Egypt's overarching strategic policy embarked on a subtle evolution.¹¹ His realignment of policy towards Israel was deeply rooted in a decision to institute sweeping political and economic reforms within Egypt while concurrently reorienting the nation away from the Soviet sphere of influence towards a more pronounced American orientation. In his quest to effectively implement these transformative reforms, Sadat deemed it imperative to de-escalate the longstanding conflict with Israel.¹²

Between the conclusion of the war in 1967 and the eruption of the next phase of conflict in October 1973, substantial time and effort was dedicated to pursuing a viable Middle East settlement. These diplomatic initiatives facilitated by the United States (US) ultimately faltered despite these earnest endeavours, culminating in a second, even more devastating war. While marked by hopes for reconciliation, this protracted period of diplomatic overtures and negotiations ultimately proved to be a precursor to further regional turmoil.¹³

The war instigated by Egypt and Syria against Israel in October 1973 represented a significant deviation from the conflicts of 1948 and 1967. Unlike those earlier wars, their decision to go to war was not driven by a

¹⁰ Bishku, 1998: 45.

¹¹ Meital, 2013: 49-50

¹² Rabinovich, 2004:15

¹³ Gat, 2012: 230

direct intent to support the Palestinian cause or an inadvertent process of uncontrolled escalation. Instead, Egypt and Syria were impelled by their profound attachments to the Sinai Peninsula and the Golan Heights as integral components of their national territories. The enduring Israeli control over these regions had reached a point of unbearable consequence for them.¹⁴

The October War marked a significant turning point, serving as a wake-up call for both Israel and Egypt. It compelled both nations to re-evaluate their perspectives, overcome psychological and political barriers, and eventually engage in negotiations that led to a peace treaty.¹⁵

The Sinai disengagement between Israel and Egypt agreement was also methodically implemented as part of this process. Israel withdrew to the eastern end of the Giddi and Mitla passes, and eventually, the Suez Canal was reopened to Israeli cargo ships. An American early warning station was also established as part of the diplomatic developments following the conflict. These measures aimed at creating stability, making it ripe for peace negotiations.¹⁶

However, the zenith of these efforts was reached with the historic visit of Egyptian President Anwar Sadat to Jerusalem, followed by the Camp David Conference. These diplomatic initiatives ultimately culminated in the signing of the Egypt-Israel Peace Treaty in 1979, known as the Camp David Accords, ushering in a profound reshaping of the geopolitical dynamics in the Middle East.¹⁷

Indeed, critically analysing the events that led to the shift in Egypt's attitude towards Israel highlights the central role of Sadat's prioritisation of Egyptian nationalism in shaping the country's foreign policy. This marked a significant departure from the pan-Arabism advocated by his predecessor, Gamal Abdel Nasser. Sadat's decision to change the country's name from the United Arab Republic to the Arab Republic of

¹⁴ Rabinovich, 2004: 15

¹⁵ Gat, 2012: 232

¹⁶ Moshe Gat, 2012: 232-233

¹⁷ Bailey, 1990: 305-306

Egypt underscored his 'Egypt first' approach, which had profound implications for shaping Egypt's behaviour on both the regional and international stages.¹⁸

Between the two wars of 1967 and 1973, Egypt underwent a notable conceptual shift in its approach that was a departure from the Khartoum Declaration. The primary objective evolved, with the regime now aiming to recover the lost territory and regain much-needed prestige. The purpose of the 1973 October war was not solely to defeat Israel militarily but rather to restore Arab, particularly Egyptian, prestige. Sadat aimed to create a political leverage that would enable Egypt to engage in meaningful negotiations with Israel.¹⁹

This shift in goals represented a change in Egypt's strategic priorities and objectives in the Arab-Israeli conflict.²⁰ As Egypt bore the weight of the Arab wars, other affluent Arab nations prospered economically without altering their fundamental stance in the conflict with Israel. While wealthy Arab nations were willing to offer partial support for Egypt's military endeavours, there was a notable absence of substantial assistance for its broader societal development requirements. Faced with the realisation that affluent Arab counterparts were not adequately addressing Egypt's needs, a pragmatic assessment of the situation unfolded.²¹

Security was the key foreign policy for Egypt's attempt towards diplomatic peace with Israel. Accordingly, the Egypt-Israeli Peace Treaty signed in 1979 stipulated a comprehensive Israeli withdrawal from the Sinai Peninsula and ensured unrestricted passage for Israeli shipping through both the Suez Canal and the Strait of Tiran.²²

Egypt's normalisation of ties with Israel not only paved the way for the restoration of relations with the US, which had been strained since the

¹⁸ Karawan, 1994: 252

¹⁹ Halliday, 2015: 58

²⁰ Stein, 2012: 195

²¹ Cohen and Azar 1981: 95

²² Kumaraswamy, 2009: 58

1967 Arab-Israeli War, but it also ushered in a fresh era of significant US financial support for Egypt, amounting to \$7.3 billion since 1974.²³ This included military and economic grants provided to Israel and Egypt at a 3-to-2 ratio under the Special International Security Assistance Act. An annual \$2 billion aid package supported Egypt's defence budget and infrastructure modernisation. Consequently, Egypt became the second-largest recipient of US aid, marking a strategic shift from the Soviet to the US sphere.²⁴

Jordan's Relations with Israel

Jordan, like Egypt, underwent a transformative period in the 1930s and 1940s to establish a distinctive national identity after gaining independence from British influence. The 1928 treaty recognised Transjordan as a sovereign state under Emir Abdullah, allowing military cooperation with Britain. Jordan's increased autonomy during World War II strengthened ties with the British. The post-war period saw the end of the British Mandate, culminating in the 1946 Anglo-Jordanian Treaty, which officially declared Jordan's independence and sovereignty.

Ever since its independence, Jordan has had to grapple with the issue of its *raison d'être*, especially when the call for Arab unity was famous among the Arab grassroots.²⁵ Just the year before, Jordan became a founding member of the Arab League in 1945, signalling its commitment to regional cooperation and solidarity with other Arab states. King Abdullah's activities in 1946-50 strongly suggest the dream of a larger Arab unit, not the existence of a unique Jordanian entity and ideology.²⁶ This, however, changed with King Hussein.

As with Egypt, Jordan became involved in the Arab-Israeli war following the declaration of the state of Israel in 1948, in support of the

²³ (U.S. Government Accountability Office, *The U.S. Economic Assistance Program For Egypt Poses A Management Challenge For AID (GAO/NSIAD-85-109)* 1985)

²⁴ Khawaja, 2013: 48

²⁵ Lucas, 2019: 195

²⁶ Russell E. Lucas, 2019: 201

Palestinian cause. Withstanding the advances of the war, King Abdullah had intended to arrive at a peace treaty with Israel. He signed an armistice agreement with the Israelis and engaged in extensive discussions that led to drafting a peace treaty between the two nations. However, due to concerns about potential opposition from other Arab states, King Abdullah refrained from finalising the treaty. The assassination of King in 1951 halted this prospect of achieving peaceful Jordanian-Israeli relations.²⁷

The period of 1952-1963 in Jordan, under King Hussein's leadership, witnessed a careful departure from the traditional pillars of Arab unity. This era marked a nuanced and unique approach to nation-building that sought to reconcile the diverse identities within Jordan, particularly after the annexation of the West Bank in 1950.²⁸

King Hussein's approach during this period seemingly characterised his focus on Jordan's national interests. Pan-Arabist rhetoric gave way to a more pragmatic approach that prioritised the stability and development of Jordan. Realising the danger posed by Palestinians posed to his rule, King Hussein's focus turned to strong Jordanian nationalism from 1963 onwards.²⁹ Relations with Israel became intense after the 1967 Six-Day War, during which Israel captured the West Bank and East Jerusalem from Jordan. Arguably, this was the central issue of the long-lasting dispute between Jordan and Israel.³⁰

King Hussein faced multiple challenges following the loss of the West Bank, including territorial loss, population shifts, economic impacts, and the loss of holy sites in Jerusalem. Recognising the limitations of military options, King Hussein shifted the focus towards diplomacy as the

²⁷ Eisenberg & Caplan, 2003 89-90

There is a theory suggesting that King Abdullah's amicable relations with Israelis in the aftermath of 1948 aimed to thwart the creation of a Palestinian Arab State and extend his authority over a larger Transjordan, encompassing territories on both sides of the Jordan River. However, it is contended that this notion of a Jewish-Hashemite cooperation to partition Palestine after the end of the British Mandate lacks substantial support. (Sela, 1992; Karsh, 1999)

²⁸ Russell E. Lucas, 2019: 202

²⁹ Russell E. Lucas, 2019: 204

³⁰ Yitzhak, 2017 561

primary means of dealing with Israel.³¹ This was actually a resumption of the approach initiated by his grandfather, King Abdullah.

As with Sadat in Egypt, King Hussein's pursuit of peace with Israel was fundamentally rooted in national interests, encompassing Jordanian sovereignty, security, economic advantages, and control over Jerusalem. The key driving force behind this initiative was the preservation of Jordanian influence in the West Bank and the prevention of a potential influx of Palestinian refugees from the Jordanian East Bank. This imperative became even more pronounced between 1980 and 1981, marked by Israel's annexation of Jerusalem and the Golan Heights. During this period, Israel launched a provocative slogan asserting that "Jordan is Palestine", posing a direct threat to Jordan's very existence.³²

The Palestinian-Jordanian divide played a significant role in shaping Jordan's nation-building process in the aftermath of the Arab-Israeli wars. The country's rhetoric evolved to underscore the distinction between Jordan and Palestine, reflecting a commitment to supporting and acknowledging Palestine's sovereignty. This shift in rhetoric was likely influenced by several factors, including the Israeli Likud party's calls for the expulsion of Palestinians to the East Bank and the establishment of an alternative Palestinian homeland in Jordan. Additionally, moves made by the Palestinian Liberation Organisation (PLO) towards declaring statehood and the Palestinian Intifada further influenced Jordanian-PLO relations.

Jordan increasingly embraced the idea of a 'two-state solution' as the most viable means to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Pursuing peace with Israel and normalising diplomatic relations with the Jewish state was seen to legitimise this new policy. This shift in identity-building profoundly impacted Jordan's approach to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.³³

³¹ Lucas, 2019 424

³² Russell E. Lucas, 2019: 366

³³ Köprülü, 2021 458

Jordan's disengagement from the West Bank, renouncing its territorial claim in July 1988, followed by the dissolution of the Parliament and ending West Bank representations, was a turning point. The decision was justified as "a measure designed to allow the PLO more responsibility for the area".³⁴ In his national address, King Hussein clarified that relinquishing authority over the West Bank did not signify Jordan's abandonment of its responsibilities in the Arab-Israeli conflict nor in its commitment to the Palestinian cause.³⁵ He explained that the decision was a response to the PLO's desire to be recognised as the sole legitimate representative of the Palestinian people.³⁶

In a sense, Jordan's decision to relinquish its authority over the West Bank was a show of support for the Palestinian cause. The move helped ensure that Jordan did not become an alternative to Palestine. It had the strategic effect of further defining separate Jordanian and Palestinian identities.³⁷ Simultaneously, it also eliminated a significant obstacle to the normalisation of relations between Jordan and Israel.³⁸

Consequently, the signing of the Jordan-Israel Peace Treaty in 1994 served as a public acknowledgement and affirmation of a discreet relationship, with its roots traced back to the 1920s during King Abdullah's reign.³⁹ The timing of this event, following the Madrid Conference of 1991, adds a noteworthy dimension, providing insights into the motivating factors driving the normalisation process.

The 1991 Gulf War created a favourable environment for American diplomatic endeavours in the Middle East.⁴⁰ The Madrid Conference in November 1991 fundamentally altered relations between Arabs and

³⁴ Office of King Hussein I, 1998

³⁵ King Hussein of Jordan, 1988

³⁶ The Arab League Summit at Rabat in October 1974 unanimously affirmed the right of the Palestinian people to self-determination and to return to their homeland, and to recognize the PLO as the sole, legitimate representative of the Palestinians. (United Nations, 1974)

³⁷ Sharnoff, 2022: 61

³⁸ Stewart, 2007 20

³⁹ Eisenberg & Caplan, 2010: 116

⁴⁰ United States Department of State, The Madrid Conference, 1991

Israelis.⁴¹ Arguably, there was a shift among most Arab states to accept the existence of Israel in the region with possibilities of negotiation towards peace.

The 1993 talks between Israel and the PLO raised concerns for King Hussein, given the potential impact on Jordanian interests, including Jerusalem, water resources, and Palestinian refugees.⁴² Apprehensive about potential side-lining following the Israeli-PLO agreements post-1993, King Hussein was determined to safeguard Jordanian influence in the West Bank following their relinquishment of authority. Recognising that new security or economic measures in the West Bank could significantly affect Jordan, King Hussein sought to position his kingdom strategically, ensuring an active role in shaping developments to its advantage.⁴³

In 1994, Jordan emerged as the second Arab nation to acknowledge Israel's existence and establish diplomatic ties formally. The significance of this peace accord lies not only in its immediate diplomatic implications but also in the broader geopolitical context. It represented the conclusion of decades during which Jordan often found itself in the challenging position of either advocating for the Palestinian cause or being perceived as a potential solution to the Palestinian problem. This agreement allowed Jordan to recalibrate its foreign policy agenda and pursue its national interests with greater autonomy and freedom from the constraints of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.⁴⁴

Forging strong ties with Israel and the US was a crucial safety net for Jordan's economic viability. Furthermore, the treaty with Israel helped repair Jordan's relations with the United States, which had been strained due to King Hussein's support for Saddam Hussein during the First Gulf War in 1991. This diplomatic move not only erased Jordan's debt of US\$702 million to the US, but also positively impacted the Jordanian

⁴¹ Bannerman, 1992: 151

⁴² Shamir, 2012: 56; Yitzhak, 2017: 568

⁴³ Laura Zittrain Eisenberg and Neil Caplan, 2010: 118

⁴⁴ Schulze, 2017: 93-94

economy. It created favourable conditions for offering incentives to attract foreign investors to invest in Jordan.⁴⁵

Most importantly, the peace treaty with Israel recognised "the present special role of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan in Muslim holy shrines in Jerusalem". It provided that "Israel will give high priority to the Jordanian historic role in these shrines" when negotiating on the permanent status. Both states agreed to "act together to promote interfaith relations among the three monotheistic religions".⁴⁶

Analysis: Normalisation Between Egypt, Jordan & Israel

The first wave of normalisation between Arab states and Israel unfolded in the aftermath of the earlier Arab-Israeli wars that began in 1948. These conflicts occurred during a critical period when Egypt and Jordan were forging their post-colonial sovereign identities, having recently attained independence. The struggles for national identity and sovereignty became intricately entwined with the geopolitical dynamics of the Arab-Israeli conflicts, influencing complex relationships and shaping the foreign policies of these nations.

In both instances of normalisation, significant territorial considerations played a crucial role. Egypt's concerns revolved around the Sinai Peninsula, while Jordan's interests extended to the West Bank and control over Jerusalem. The resolution of these territorial disputes was crucial for safeguarding their respective sovereignties, serving as a pivotal factor in the normalisation processes between these nations.

This imperative also necessitated the establishment of defence negotiations. Notably, Egypt and Jordan took a distinctive approach by forging armistice agreements, possibly laying the groundwork for normalisation. These agreements demonstrate a pragmatic approach by

⁴⁵ Yitzhak, 2017 567

⁴⁶ Press Department of the Royal Hashemite Court, The Washington Declaration - July 25, 1994; United Nations, 1994: Washington Declaration signed by Jordan and Israel – Letter from Russia and the United States, Jordan and Israel

Egypt and Jordan to prioritising national security and stability, shifting away from pan-Arab hostility against Israel in support of the Palestinian cause.

In addition to sovereign and security concerns, Egypt and Jordan experienced economic benefits due to improved relations with the US. After the 1979 peace treaty, Egypt received substantial financial aid from the US to support its economy. Similarly, Jordan, following the normalisation of relations with Israel, also received US economic assistance. These instances strengthened the economic foundations of Egypt and Jordan and fostered enhanced diplomatic ties between these countries and the US.

Further Development of Arab-Israeli Relations During First Wave of Normalisation

The period from 1979 to 2000 witnessed significant developments in Arab-Israeli relations, marked by both potential and realised normalisation efforts. Qatar progressively enhanced its relations with Israel, particularly since the 1991 Gulf War, marking a notable development as the first Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) member to extend de facto recognition to Israel. Notably, Doha, the capital of Qatar, has hosted an Israeli trade representation office since 1996, indicating a diplomatic channel for economic engagement between the two nations.⁴⁷

Following the signing of the Declaration of Principles between Israel and the Palestinians on September 13, 1993, the Gulf states took a crucial step by abolishing the secondary and tertiary Arab boycotts, restricting only direct trade with Israel as illegal. During this period, the media's anti-Israeli stance diminished, with instances where Israel was portrayed more favourably. While diplomatic ties were not established, there were indications that trade with Israel, facilitated through third

⁴⁷ Rabi, 2009.

parties, had already commenced. Several trade initiatives were initiated, marked by official visits of Israeli officials to Oman, Qatar, and Bahrain.⁴⁸

In 1994, following the Oslo Accords between the Palestinians and Israel, King Hassan II of Morocco took a significant step by initiating diplomatic relations at a lower, non-ambassadorial level. This move positioned Morocco as the third Arab nation, following in the footsteps of Egypt and Jordan, to formally establish relations with the state of Israel.⁴⁹

Most of these developments were significantly impacted by the second intifada of 2000-2005 and subsequent conflicts between Israel and Palestine. In 2002, the Arab League, led by Saudi Arabia, proposed the Arab Peace Initiative, offering normalisation of relations between Arab states and Israel in exchange for Israel's withdrawal to pre-1967 borders and a just solution to the Palestinian refugee issue. The initiative was re-endorsed in subsequent years but has never materialised.

Second Wave of Normalisation: Abraham Accords

The period following the Oslo Accords saw Arab countries quietly establishing informal ties with Israel, albeit discreetly due to public opposition.⁵⁰ However, a significant shift occurred in 2020 with the signing of the Abraham Accords, marking the second wave of normalisation between Muslim states and Israel.

The agreement fostered a concept of 'warm peace' and opened doors for extensive bilateral and plurilateral development agreements, holding substantial potential implications for numerous nations.⁵¹ They formalised and brought to light the gradual progress made in bilateral relations between Israel and several Arab Gulf states since the Madrid Conference.⁵²

The Abraham Accords led to a series of treaties between Arab states UAE and Bahrain, which brought about established diplomatic relations,

⁴⁸ Elisheva Rosman-Stollman, 2004: 194

⁴⁹ Chtatou, 2021

⁵⁰ Rahman, 2021

⁵¹ Canal Forgues Alter & Janardhan, 2021 4

⁵² Guzansky & Marshall, 2020 379; Rosman-Stollman, 2004 194

commercial opportunities, technology exchanges, and discussions on regional security matters between Israel and Gulf Arab states.⁵³ It also established relations with African Muslim states Morocco and Sudan.

In the following sections, this paper will study the development of these relations, emphasising a case study of the UAE, which stands out for its substantial engagement in building relationships, surpassing the efforts of other countries in the Accords.

United Arab Emirates Relations with Israel

The shift of the UAE's foreign policy towards Israel, initially entrenched in pan-Arab rivalry, necessitates examination within the country's national identity formation framework. This transformation finds its roots in the collective experience of modernisation that ensued after the British withdrawal from the Gulf in 1971, culminating in the establishment of a federation comprising seven emirates in the UAE. As a result, the country's foreign policy orientation serves its economic endeavours and other national interests.⁵⁴

In a speech at the 2022 Abu Dhabi Strategic Debate, Dr Anwar Gargash, the former minister of state for foreign affairs for UAE, articulated the fundamental principles guiding the UAE's foreign policy. At the forefront is the commitment to prioritise the prosperity and security of the UAE, emphasising an approach that seamlessly integrates national values with interests. A second key principle underscores the unwavering focus on sustaining the country's long-term economic prosperity through foreign policy initiatives. Furthermore, a third critical aspect entails a substantial investment in the security and autonomy of the UAE, strategically executed through a comprehensive multi-layered approach. These principles collectively form a robust argument delineating the top three priorities in the UAE's foreign policy considerations, illuminating a nuanced strategy that intertwines economic well-being, national values,

⁵³ Vakil & Quilliam, 2023: 2

⁵⁴ MacLean, 2021

and security imperatives.⁵⁵ The normalisation of relations between the UAE and Israel sits along these principles.

On the security aspect, the UAE's precarious position between regional rivals Saudi Arabia and Iran, coupled with broader regional instability and the absence of a reliable regional security framework, has led to its extensive arms imports and pursuit of defensive alliances.⁵⁶ In this regard, the UAE has a "primary strategic security relationship remains unequivocally with the United States".⁵⁷ In 2019, the year before the Abraham Accords, UAE and US signed an updated defence cooperation agreement that aimed to "enhance military coordination between the two nations, further advancing an already robust military, political, and economic partnership at a critical time".⁵⁸

The US-facilitated Abraham Accords are frequently perceived as a strategic response to the challenges posed by Iran, particularly following the 2015 nuclear agreement. The persistent security challenge in the region, characterised by tense relations between Iran and the GCC since 1981, played a pivotal role in motivating the normalisation of relations between Israel and the UAE.⁵⁹ However, it is worth noting that while Iran's security threats are a significant factor, they may not necessarily be the primary concern for the UAE as it is for Bahrain and Saudi Arabia, which is discussed in the later sections of this paper.

Notably, in 2021, the year after normalising relations with Israel, Sheikh Tahnoun bin Zayed, the UAE's National Security Adviser, visited Iran and "discussed expanding bilateral ties and regional issues".⁶⁰ Then, in March 2023, Iran's top security official, Ali Shamkhani, met President of the UAE, Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, during his visit to Abu

⁵⁵ UAE Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2022: Speech on the UAE's foreign policy

⁵⁶ Mason, 2023: 50

⁵⁷ Rahman, 2021

⁵⁸ The White House, 2019

⁵⁹ Shahandeh & Warnaar, 2016

⁶⁰ The National, 2021: Sheikh Tahnoun bin Zayed meets Iranian President.

Dhabi. Shamkhani said that the trip was "a new stage for political, economic and security relations".⁶¹

The UAE's normalisation of relations with Israel should be studied in the context of the broader regional and international engagements undertaken by the UAE. A key aspect of this analysis involves observing the adept management of amicable relations with GCC neighbours and the broader Arab world. Simultaneously, the UAE strategically reinforces cooperative security arrangements with Western nations, positioning itself as a proactive participant in global diplomacy and security initiatives as a precautionary measure against potential crises.⁶²

The nuanced diplomatic strategy of the UAE is further underscored by its endeavours in normalisation with Israel and the reproachment with Iran, both occurring between 2020 and 2023. These diplomatic moves are indicative of the UAE's commitment to navigating the complexities of geopolitics in a manner that aligns with its national interests. By engaging with diverse regional and international actors, the UAE showcases a diplomatic finesse that seeks to balance multiple relationships, ensuring strategic positioning and safeguarding its interests amid the intricacies of global geopolitics.

The Abraham Accords strengthened the prevailing security and military partnership between Israel and the UAE. Reports suggest that security-related engagements between these nations date back to the 1970s and 1990s, with the UAE reportedly evolving into a "regular customer of Israeli security firms".⁶³ Such collaborations surfaced long before the formal lifting of the UAE's boycott law against Israeli companies in 2020 and the subsequent normalisation of relations.

From an economic perspective, the relationship with Israel should be considered in the context of Dubai's significant progress since 2009. Notable growth has been observed in trade imports, foreign direct

⁶¹ Reuters, 2023: Iran's top security official in UAE to seek stronger ties

⁶² Rugh, 1996

⁶³ Tariq Dana, 2023: 63

investment, and improvements in ease of doing business rankings. This economic advancement can be attributed to proactive government measures and investments aimed at enhancing the UAE's soft power. Foreign investment, trade, and tourism have also played contributing roles.⁶⁴ The UAE's ability to attract investments from conflict-affected regions underscores the importance of political and economic stability, a principle that aligns with its diplomatic engagement with Israel.⁶⁵

These new diplomatic ties were anticipated to support UAE's long-term visions by providing it access to Israel's expertise, innovation, and diverse economy. The collaboration is in alignment with the UAE's goals of economic diversification, innovation, global partnerships, knowledge exchange, and sustainable development outlined in its Vision 2021 and Centennial 2071 strategies.⁶⁶ Indeed, there have been notable advancements in the UAE-Israel relationship since the signing of the Abraham Accords, including the initiation of direct flights, the utilisation of each other's ports, enhanced financial cooperation, an agreement to extend an Israeli oil pipeline to the UAE, and the establishment of the US\$3 billion Abraham Fund for regional economic development in partnership with the US International Development Finance Corporation. These developments underscore the increasing economic and strategic cooperation between the two nations following the normalisation of diplomatic relations.⁶⁷

Abdulla bin Touq Al Marri, the Minister of Economy of the UAE, has articulated the shared aspiration of both countries to generate over US\$1 trillion in economic activity over the next decade.⁶⁸ In May 2022, the UAE took a historic step by signing a free trade agreement with Israel, becoming the first Arab state to do so.⁶⁹ It was reported that trade in goods

⁶⁴ Traub, Cohen, & Kertcher, 2022: 66

⁶⁵ Mason, 2023: 51

⁶⁶ Alketbi, 2020

⁶⁷ Canal Forgues Alter & Janardhan, 2021: 42

⁶⁸ Saba, 2021

⁶⁹ Al Jazeera, 2022: Israel signs first Arab free trade agreement with UAE

between these countries reached a new record of US\$2.56 billion, positioning the UAE at the 16th spot out of 126 countries with which Israel trades.⁷⁰

Relations Between Israel, Bahrain & Morocco

Bahrain, a signatory to the Abraham Accords, attained independence in 1971. Traditionally, the country maintained no diplomatic relations with Israel, aligning with the prevailing pan-Arab sentiments that opposed engagement with Israel. Nevertheless, in 2020, a blend of geopolitical, economic, and security factors prompted a shift in Bahrain's foreign policy toward Israel.

As the only Gulf nation in the Middle East with a Shia-majority population governed by a Sunni-led monarchy, Bahrain has consistently faced challenges stemming from Iran's regional influence. Consequently, it comes as no surprise that in 2020, Bahrain formalised relations with Israel, emerging as the first Gulf country to establish security cooperation with the nation.⁷¹ In March 2022, Bahrain signed a Memorandum of Understanding with Israel covering intelligence sharing, military collaboration, industrial partnerships, and other areas.⁷²

On the economic aspects, Bahrain, like other Gulf countries, also formulated an ambitious economic and social transformation agenda.⁷³ In October 2008, it unveiled its Economic Vision 2030.⁷⁴ This plan outlines clear objectives related to sustainability and resource conservation, areas where technological climate solutions from Israel can play a crucial role in supporting Bahrain's goals.⁷⁵

In contrast to the positive economic outcomes observed in the UAE-Israel relationship, the results in the case of Bahrain have not been

⁷⁰ Arab News, 2023: UAE-Israel trade hits record high to reach \$2.56bn

⁷¹ Cafiero, 2023

⁷² Reuters, 2022

⁷³ Mogielnicki, 2022

⁷⁴ Kingdom of Bahrain, *Bahrain 2030*

⁷⁵ The Times of Israel, 2023: Exploring Innovation Initiatives Between Israel and Bahrain 202

parallel. While trade between the UAE and Israel reached approximately US\$2.5 billion in value in 2021-22, in contrast, the trade value between Bahrain and Israel amounted to only US\$20 million.⁷⁶ In September 2023, Israel inaugurated its embassy in Bahrain after three years of normalising relations to expand the number of direct flights, boost tourism, increase trade volume, and to attract investments between the two nations.⁷⁷

Morocco, another Abraham Accords signatory, embarked on a path to normalise relations with Israel, adding a new layer to its enduring identity crisis. Positioned in North Africa, the country grapples with a nuanced struggle between its strong affiliation to Arab culture and its African heritage. This intricate identity dynamic is notably interwoven with its relationship with the Arab League, compelling Morocco to delicately navigate the preservation of its Arab identity while acknowledging its deep-rooted ties to Africa. Beyond its Arab connections, Morocco boasts a long and rich history of Jewish presence, hosting one of the largest Jewish communities in the region even before the establishment of Israel in 1948. This historical tapestry contributes to the multifaceted nature of Morocco's identity, making it a unique player in the regional and global landscape.

As for Morocco, unlike UAE and Bahrain, a ‘partial normalisation’⁷⁸ was based on shared historical ties and a ‘shared heritage and cultural affinity’.⁷⁹ Following the Israel-Morocco normalisation agreement in December 2020, the Moroccan government has actively advanced its initiatives to showcase and preserve Moroccan Jewish life. This includes restoration plans for numerous Jewish sites, the establishment of the country's first university campus synagogue, and formal acknowledgement of the Jewish community's valuable contributions to Morocco's cultural heritage.⁸⁰

⁷⁶ Zalaya & Guzansky, 2023

⁷⁷ Hamad, 2023

⁷⁸ Abouzzohour, 2020

⁷⁹ TRT World, 2020: Israel-Morocco agreement follows a history of clandestine cooperation

⁸⁰ Millner, Link, & Winter, 2022

However, for Morocco, the underlying feature of the Abraham Accords is US recognition of Morocco's sovereignty over Western Sahara.⁸¹ In July 2023, Israel also recognised Morocco's sovereignty over Western Sahara, a move that is expected to encourage Israeli investments in the region.⁸² This coincides with a notable increase in trade between these countries since the signing of the peace treaties.⁸³ In February 2022, Israel and Morocco inked a new bilateral agreement, aiming to achieve an annual trade volume of US\$500 million.⁸⁴

Analysis: Normalisation Between UAE, Bahrain & Morocco

In contrast to Egypt and Jordan, the Gulf nations do not share direct borders with Israel. They seldom engaged in explicit military conflicts with Israel.⁸⁵ Morocco was also not involved in the frontline of the early Arab-Israeli wars. Instead, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict played a significant role in deterring many Arab and Muslim states from formalising relations with Israel. The widespread Arab support for the Palestinian national movement resulted in the collective Arab stance that prioritised the Palestinian cause over individual national interests concerning Israel.⁸⁶ Consequently, the UAE, Bahrain, and Morocco refrained from establishing diplomatic ties with Israel. These nations are members of the Arab League, which founded the PLO⁸⁷ and upheld a long-standing boycott of Israel.⁸⁸ Bahrain and the UAE are also part of the GCC, which has traditionally supported the Palestinian cause. In 2020, the position of these countries towards Israel changed with the Abraham Accords.

⁸¹ Fakir, 2022

⁸² Eljehtimi, 2023

⁸³ The Ministry of Regional Cooperation, State of Israel, 2022

⁸⁴ Kasraoui, 2023; (TOI), 2022

⁸⁵ Jones & Guzansky, 2019 28

⁸⁶ Rahman, 2021

⁸⁷ Taylor, 1982 73

⁸⁸ The Arab League has been leading the boycotts of Zionist goods and services in British controlled mandate territory of Palestine since 1945 and then against State of Israel since 1948. (See Congressional Research Service (CRS), 2017)

While the peace pacts between Israel, Egypt, and Jordan emerged in the aftermath of the Arab-Israeli war, they fell short of fostering deeper economic ties between the nations. In contrast, a significant impetus for the normalisation agreements in 2020 was the pursuit of increased economic and technological cooperation.⁸⁹

Although national interests were instrumental in fostering improved relations, the US played a central role, emerging as a primary driver for the timing of the second wave of normalisation. The incentives provided by the US, such as recognition of Morocco's sovereignty over Western Sahara, were integral to the agreements.

In the case of the UAE, the US held a crucial position as a regional strategic security partner. The normalisation with Israel marked the initiation of the Strategic Agenda for the Middle East between these nations, aiming to expand diplomatic, trade, and security cooperation.⁹⁰ Reports also suggest that a promise was made from the Donald Trump administration to sell F-35 fighter jets to UAE.⁹¹ For Bahrain, a nation hosting the US Navy Fifth Fleet, its close relations with the US are considered a vital safeguard against potential threats, particularly from Iran. It is crucial to bear in mind that each Arab-Israeli agreement fundamentally constitutes an agreement between the Arab nations and the US. This pattern is evident in the two waves of normalisation, since 1979 as highlighted in earlier sections.

Beyond that, the Abraham Accords have not only strengthened ties between Bahrain and Israel but have also aligned Bahrain more closely with the prosperous UAE, serving as a counterweight to the influence of Saudi Arabia in the region.⁹²

The themes of sovereign identity, security, and economic benefits, evident in the first wave of normalisation between Arab states Egypt and

⁸⁹ ORF, 2020: Israel's normalisation with UAE and Bahrain: A prognosis for the region

⁹⁰ U.S. Mission Israel 2021: Joint Statement of the United States, the State of Israel, and the United Arab Emirates.

⁹¹ Gause, 2023

⁹² Cornwell, 2023

Jordan, can also be identified in the second wave involving the UAE and Bahrain. This reveals a common thread of priorities centred on national interests that have influenced the foreign policy of these Arab states toward Israel, a historical regional adversary.

Notably, akin to the disruption observed in the first wave of normalisation between Arab states and Israel during the second intifada, the ongoing second wave faces potential upheavals due to the Israel-Hamas conflict in Gaza, which commenced on October 7, 2023, following Hamas' attack on Israel. This raises pertinent inquiries regarding the sustainability of ongoing and prospective Saudi-Israeli normalisation developments.

Lingering Saudi Arabia-Israel Normalisation

For much of its history, Saudi Arabia, like many other Arab nations, did not recognise Israel's existence and actively supported the Palestinian cause. This stance was accompanied by the country's **active participation** in several conflicts with Israel, including the significant Arab-Israeli wars of 1948, 1967, and 1973. These conflicts not only heightened regional tensions but also hindered any prospects of diplomatic relations between Saudi Arabia and Israel.

However, in the 1990s and early 2000s, there were subtle indications of a thaw in relations between Israel and some Gulf states, including Saudi Arabia. This shift was driven by shared concerns about Iran's growing regional influence and a mutual desire for cooperation in security and technology. During this period, behind-the-scenes communications and collaboration emerged, marking a notable change in their relationship.

In the last ten years, Israel and Saudi Arabia have formed a strong partnership mainly to deal with Iran. They have engaged in direct discussions regarding the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, with Saudi Arabia displaying a greater understanding of Israel's concerns compared to previous years. Saudi Arabia has even taken steps towards normalising

its relationship with Israel. These developments are significant, especially considering they occurred despite the lack of progress in resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and, at times, against the wishes of Palestinian leaders. This shift is primarily attributed to the escalating Iranian threat and Israel's demonstrated ability to counter it when Saudi Arabia's traditional allies appeared unable or unwilling to do so.

Consequently, Saudi Arabia is no longer allowing the Palestinian issue to dictate its policy towards Israel, prioritising its national security interests.⁹³ Indeed, the primary driving force behind this relationship is the anti-Iran alliance. However, this is now questionable, with the 2023 Saudi-Iran deal facilitated by China⁹⁴ and the entry of Saudi and Iran into the BRICS group.⁹⁵ It is plausible to interpret Saudi Arabia's actions as part of a strategic balancing act in both regional and global politics, akin to the foreign policy behaviour observed in the UAE.

Along these lines is Saudi Vision 2030, which encompasses many objectives and reform plans to secure the Kingdom's long-term economic prosperity. Saudi Arabia is undergoing a significant economic transformation characterised by a series of reforms aimed at reducing its historical reliance on oil, diversifying sources of income, and improving overall competitiveness. This strategic shift reflects a broader vision for the country's economic future, focusing on creating a more diversified and sustainable financial foundation. This ambitious goal strongly suggests a potential opening to the Israeli economy.⁹⁶

Saudi Arabia has substantial economic clout and significant oil production capacity, whereas Israel brings technological innovation expertise, proficiency in internet software development, and modern financial stability. These factors allow the two nations to seek advantage of each other's economic and technical strengths.⁹⁷ A concrete illustration

⁹³ Rynhold & Yaari, 2020: 2

⁹⁴ Jash, 2023

⁹⁵ Reuters, 2023: BRICS invites six countries including Saudi Arabia, Iran to be new members

⁹⁶ Salem, 2023

⁹⁷ Niu & Wu, 2021 184-185

of this collaboration is evident in reports detailing Trump's son-in-law Jared Kushner's investment of funds sourced from Saudi Arabia's Public Investment Fund into hi-tech Israeli firms.⁹⁸

Indeed, Saudi Arabia's gradual approach toward normalising relations with Israel is primarily motivated by national interests, including security and economic benefits, much like other Arab states that have recently established ties with Israel. However, what sets Saudi Arabia's relationship with Israel apart is its role as the guardian of Islam's two holiest cities, Mecca and Medina.

While the potential impact of Saudi-Israeli relations on the Kingdom's leadership role in the Muslim world remains uncertain, it is plausible that concerted efforts may be exerted. The influential position held by Saudi Arabia in regional entities like the GCC and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation provides avenues to shape the broader Muslim world's perception of relations with Israel. This dynamic could be leveraged in Saudi Arabia's strategic interactions with the US and Israel, although these projections remain speculative. Nonetheless, they merit consideration in the evolving landscape of diplomatic relations between Muslim states and Israel.

At the same time, as Saudi Arabia forges closer ties with Israel to address concerns regarding Iran, it may be mindful of preserving its national values and avoiding actions that might diminish its leadership role in the Islamic world.⁹⁹ Consequently, the Saudi leadership will approach agreements with Israel cautiously, aiming to strike a balance between its growing alignment with the Abraham Accords and its ongoing commitment to the Palestinian cause. The key question lies in how Saudi Arabia will navigate this delicate balancing act.¹⁰⁰ The recent appointment of Saudi Arabia's inaugural ambassador to Palestine, occurring amidst

⁹⁸ Nissenbaum & Jones, 2022

⁹⁹ Niu & Wu, 2021 186

¹⁰⁰ Eyal, 2023

discussions with the US concerning a potential normalisation of relations with Israel, appears to be a part of this effort.¹⁰¹

Although the interests and motivations behind establishing diplomatic ties are apparent, the actual outcomes remain uncertain. The US, which is facilitating the negotiations between Saudi Arabia and Israel, has confirmed that as of August 2023, further discussions are required before a potential agreement to normalise relations can be achieved.¹⁰² A one-year timeframe has been set for the negotiations, which warrants global attention. Additionally, it is crucial to closely monitor concurrent developments in the region, including China's increasing involvement in the Middle East,¹⁰³ Saudi Arabia's recent BRICS membership,¹⁰⁴ and Saudi Arabia's support for Palestine. A recent report indicates that Saudi Arabia has expressed its willingness to reinstate financial assistance to the Palestinian Authority, demonstrating a clear commitment from the Kingdom to address challenges in the path towards establishing diplomatic ties with Israel.¹⁰⁵

Post-2023 Israel-Hamas War: Third Round of Normalisation, Inclusive of Palestinian Representation

The Israel-Hamas war in Gaza that commenced on October 7, 2023, has significantly heightened concerns among stakeholders in the Middle East, casting doubt on the continuation of the trend of Arab states normalising relations with Israel. This war is unlike previous flare-ups in the longstanding conflict. President Joe Biden referred to Hamas' attack on Israel as “the deadliest day for Jews since the Holocaust”.¹⁰⁶ United Nations independent experts have also expressed renewed concerns about an ongoing potential genocide and the prospect of a second Nakba,

¹⁰¹ Salman, 2023

¹⁰² Al Jazeera, 2023. US says no framework agreed yet for Israel-Saudi normalisation deal

¹⁰³ Jash, 2023

¹⁰⁴ Reuters, 2023. BRICS invites six countries including Saudi Arabia, Iran to be new members

¹⁰⁵ Nissenbaum & Said, 2023

¹⁰⁶ The White House, Remarks by President Biden and Second Gentleman Douglas Emhoff

underlining the gravity of the situation.¹⁰⁷ There has been significant attention from all over the world, with numerous large scale pro-Palestine rallies condemning Israel. The issue has become a focal point in international discourse, impacting diplomatic relations and shaping the stances of governments around the world.

Hamas's October 7 attack on Israel is said to coincide with Arab leaders' normalisation efforts with Israel, potentially straining existing and expected relations. Egyptian Diplomat Hesham Youssef suggests that this war may further strain Israel's ties with Egypt and Jordan, who are the **'original peacemakers' with Israel and other Arab countries closely tied to the Palestinian issue.** In Morocco, there is a discrepancy between the government's stance, which emphasises dialogue, and public sentiment, with thousands protesting in Rabat and calling for the annulment of the 2020 normalisation agreement. Polls indicate that only one-third of Moroccans favoured normalising relations with Israel even before the conflict. The ongoing conflict in Gaza is also impacting the Israeli-Saudi deal, keeping it on hold.¹⁰⁸

Despite reports of Bahrain recalling its Ambassador to Israel and severing economic ties, there is no significant indication of a broader regression in normalisation with Israel. In the UAE, Israel's participation in the 28th United Nations Climate Change Conference in Dubai showcases continued engagement.¹⁰⁹ On the other hand, the UAE presented a resolution at the United Nations calling for an immediate ceasefire in Gaza, although this was vetoed by the US.¹¹⁰ These developments prompt a re-evaluation of the Palestinian cause within the context of the ongoing waves of normalisation between Arab states and Israel.

In the pursuit of a resolution to the Israel-Palestine conflict, diplomatic endeavours have witnessed nuanced developments, particularly concerning the normalisation of relations between Israel and

¹⁰⁷ United Nations, 2023: Palestine: Preventing a genocide in Gaza and a new "Nakba" 2023

¹⁰⁸ Hesham Youssef, 2023; Gause, 2023; Seurat, 2023

¹⁰⁹ Surkes, 2023

¹¹⁰ Nichols, 2023

certain Arab states. Notably, the Camp David Accords of 1979 primarily addressed the normalisation of relations between Egypt and Israel, with the Palestinian question and broader regional issues mainly relegated to the background.

Subsequently, the Madrid Conference in 1991 marked the initiation of direct negotiations between Israel and its Arab neighbours, fostering an atmosphere conducive to dialogue. This evolved into the Oslo Accords, which aimed at establishing the Palestinian Authority and facilitating partial Israeli withdrawals from the West Bank and Gaza.

Although these attempts did not comprehensively address all outstanding issues, they influenced a gradual shift in regional dynamics. Notably, the normalisation of relations between Jordan and Israel in 1994, independent of the Oslo process, demonstrated a pragmatic approach towards conflict resolution.

In the case of the Abraham Accords, the UAE's normalisation with Israel included an agreement to stop further Israeli annexation of Palestinian territories. The UAE affirmed its continued commitment to the Arab Peace Initiative and the rights of the Palestinian people to establish a Palestinian state with East Jerusalem as its capital.¹¹¹ Saudi Arabia also stands firm in its intention to find a pathway to peace for the Palestinian people, before any normalisation with Israel, and insists that only an independent Palestinian state can be a solution for the conflict.¹¹²

The normalisation process among Arab states, motivated by sovereignty, economy, and security considerations, stands apart from the Palestinian issue. Nonetheless, achieving stability in the region mandates addressing the Israel-Palestine conflict. The 2023 Israel-Hamas war marks a critical juncture, necessitating a renewed commitment to normalisation. Key regional players, such as Saudi Arabia, the US, Qatar, and Iran, could spearhead a fresh wave of normalisation, given the developments before this war. China's role as a facilitator at some level

¹¹¹ UAE Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2020: Freeze on annexation of Palestinian territories

¹¹² Marlow, 2023

may be leveraged, especially after the recent Iran-Saudi deals. This initiative must prioritise proper representation for the Palestinian people and advocate for a comprehensive two-state solution, underscoring a collective dedication to regional stability and the overdue resolution of the Israel-Palestine conflict.

However, this optimistic proposal is not without its challenges. Firstly, uncertainties persist regarding the ongoing repercussions of the conflict. Secondly, the issue of effective Palestinian representation poses a significant obstacle. Reports suggest the potential for collaboration between the Palestinian Authority and the US for a post-war plan for Gaza.¹¹³ Nevertheless, the viability of this plan appears contingent on the cessation of hostilities, a prospect complicated by the US voting against a **ceasefire, citing concerns of an “imbalanced resolution divorced from reality”**.¹¹⁴ The United Kingdom has also abstained from the voting for ceasefire. This may create a division between Western powers and the Muslim world, which could affect regional relations in the Middle East. Hence, the trend of normalisation of relations between Muslim states and Israel cannot continue from the Abraham Accords and requires a pivot that factors in the effects of the 2023 war.

Incorporating the Israel-Palestine conflict into the normalisation agenda of Arab states with Israel might hinder progress of normalisation, as in the case of earlier attempts. Still, the cases of Egypt, Jordan, and the UAE demonstrate a tendency to regard the matter as essential yet distinct from the normalisation process. This approach entails the intricate task of balancing Palestinian interests with the national interests of the states involved, on which Saudi Arabia needs to focus, as the desired economic endeavours for Saudi Arabia and other regional players are only possible **“in a stable Middle East with strong ties to the United States”**.¹¹⁵

¹¹³ Bronner & Hodali, 2023

¹¹⁴ Moench, 2023

¹¹⁵ Gause, 2023

Conclusion

The initial phase of normalisation between Arab states (Egypt and Jordan) with Israel commenced in the aftermath of the 1948-49 Arab-Israeli War, where national identity and border security emerged as the primary driving forces. This marked a divergence from the earlier pan-Arab solidarity against Israel's establishment as a Jewish state on Palestinian land.

The subsequent wave of normalisation unfolded in a different context, characterised by Muslim states directing their foreign policy towards strategic imperatives contributing to security and economic growth. The UAE is a significant case study in this shift, with Bahrain and Morocco also making notable progress.

The temporal context of these normalisation efforts provides valuable insights. The first wave occurred during decolonisation, when these states were gaining independence. In contrast, the second wave coincided with economic globalisation. Arab states, including Qatar, the UAE, and now Saudi Arabia, are actively seeking to develop as financial and trade hubs bridging the East and West.

Arguably, the normalisation of relations between Arab states and Israel aimed at satisfying economic and security interests can happen void of a solution to the Israel-Palestine issue. However, this would come with ongoing regional instability, threatening the vital Middle East peace. Therefore, any further normalisation of Arab states with Israel should occur with a solution for the statehood of Palestine being a peripheral agenda. Saudi Arabia's anticipated relations with Israel, facilitated by the US, could focus on developing a normalisation framework in the aftermath of the 2023 Israel-Hamas war as a third phase of normalisation.

Revitalised efforts for normalisation between Arab states in the Middle East and Israel might potentially extend to Muslim countries in other regions, exemplified by Indonesia, which currently maintains a 'relationship in waiting' with Israel. The prospects of Indonesia transitioning from covert relations to diplomatic ties with Israel hinge

significantly on the resolution of the ongoing issues surrounding Palestine.¹¹⁶

The evolving dynamics in Arab-Israeli relations could potentially influence broader diplomatic engagements, presenting an opportunity for the expansion of ties between Israel and Muslim-majority nations beyond the immediate Middle Eastern region. This, as emphasised in this paper, must come with a sustainable solution for a Palestinian state that provides freedom and dignity to its people next to the Jewish state of Israel.

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¹¹⁶ Barton & Rubenstein, 2005

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