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**THE ABRAHAM ACCORDS HAVE
BACKFIRED - THE DESTABILISATION
OF THE MIDDLE EAST**

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Introduction

The eruption of yet another armed conflict between Israel and Palestine is wreaking havoc within a geopolitical region which has recently been under a process of progressive stabilisation and pacification. The Abraham Accords have been a critical component of this process and its diplomatic formalisation. However, Hamas' terrorist attacks on 7 October 2023 and the subsequent Israeli retaliation are hampering this entire pacification process. If tensions continue to escalate, they will conceivably deter the continuation and extension of these ambitious accords. The Abraham Accords were brokered in 2020 between Israel, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and Bahrain as a result of the diplomatic mediation of the Trump administration. They were almost unanimously met as an extremely positive development for the region and for the promotion of mutually beneficial economic relationships. The subsequent expansion of the Accords to Morocco and Sudan, combined with the willingness shown by Saudi Arabia to join, contributed to this climate of optimism and convinced the West that stability and peace for the Middle East were on the horizon. However, in light of recent events, it has become increasingly clear that by failing to address the Palestinian issue and by creating a perception of strategic encirclement on Iran, the Accords have also indirectly contributed to the destabilisation of the region. Now, facing the risk of a broader regional conflict with potential disruptive global consequences the United States' efforts to pivot away from this area may now encounter serious setbacks. Therefore, it could be argued that the two defining goals of the Abraham Accords, which are to stabilise the Middle East and allow the US to decrease its strategic commitment towards the region, are far from being met.

The Origins and Nature of the Accords

Several historical explanations can contribute to making sense of the seemingly inherent instability of the Middle East. For instance, one explanation underlines the significance of the Sykes-Picot Accords of 1915, which divided territory in the region into areas of British and French colonial control. A second explanation stresses the significance of the unnatural borders that were drawn in this geopolitical area following the end of the colonial era. A third explanation, and perhaps the most contested, is the artificial and unilateral creation of the state of Israel within the Arab world, which was vehemently opposed by the local population and the neighbouring Arab states ever since. Whatever the reasons for this lingering instability, the Accords signed in September 2020 at the White House between Israel and the UAE, with Bahrain, Sudan and Morocco following suit, were widely considered a watershed moment given that only Egypt and Jordan had previously normalised their relationships with Israel. The Abraham Accords are a peace treaty establishing diplomatic relations and full normalisation between the two states. They also foster cooperation in multiple sectors such as healthcare, agriculture, tourism, energy, environment and innovation (Yossef, 2021). The crux is to achieve economic integration in a region scarcely interconnected and generally more dependent on external economic partnerships. However, it is worth noting that these integrative efforts are primarily rooted in achieving higher levels of long-term security cooperation (Dachtler 2022).

The Accords' signatories have a common perception of the threat Iran may pose due to its nuclear program and expanding strategic reach through proxies like Hezbollah in Lebanon and the Hutu in Yemen, and this is paving the way for the signatories' rapprochement in the realm of security. Arms trade and military cooperation, which also reaches the maritime security domain in the Red Sea and the Persian Gulf, were gaining momentum after the formalisation of the Abraham Accords (Ningthoujan 2022). Additionally, air and missile defence cooperation was expected to be realised between the Gulf Arab States and Israel (Saab 2022). Facing the increasingly precise missiles and swarm of armed drones that Iran and its proxies' have at their disposal, Israel and the Arab States of the Gulf both have interests in developing more effective shield and anti-missile systems.

Arguably, greater security cooperation between Israel and the Arab states, which would allow the United States to step down its commitment to the region, is also the main goal pursued by Washington. Increasingly constrained by the unsustainability of its military overstretch and the need to redistribute military assets in geopolitical areas of greater strategic importance, Washington must reduce its military presence and financial commitment in the Middle East. While still relevant, this geopolitical area is of decreasing importance in the strategic calculus of the Western superpower. Domestic production of energy in the U.S., mainly thanks to hydraulic fracturing and horizontal drilling known as fracking, has increased more rapidly within the last ten years than at any other time in recent history, making the country the world's largest natural gas and crude oil producer (Kelsey et al, 2016). Now, as almost an energy-independent country and among the global largest producers and exporters of gas and oil, mostly shale oil and gas, the relevance of the Middle East for the US has shrunk significantly. Moreover, after decades of largely unsuccessful and extremely costly wars in this region, public opinion in the United States strongly favours decreasing the presence of the country's military within the region. These trends have been effectively captured by Sandler (2020), when the author pointed out that the rationale of the Abraham Accords became evident in light of the slow but consistent withdrawal of the U.S. from the Middle East due to its achieved energy independence and growing public opinion fatigue towards the region. However, leaving the Middle East altogether and thus creating an enormous geopolitical vacuum within the region is not an option. While Washington understands the need to reallocate assets and resources towards different geopolitical areas, the systemic instability and/or the growing influence of strategic competitors in the region that would follow is not an acceptable price to pay for the United States. As a consequence, starting a process aimed at rendering Israel the regional security provider and the linchpin of an anti-Iran security architecture for the Middle East is the most straightforward solution the U.S. can pursue. Israel is the closest strategic partner of the U.S. in the region, it has a nuclear deterrence power, it has an extremely effective military, and boasts one of the most cutting-edge and technologically advanced weapon industries in the world. Therefore, it is the most credible candidate to become the replacement of the United States as a regional security provider.

The signing of the Abraham Accord was an important milestone in the U.S. effort to disentangle itself from the Middle East while trying to prevent instability and keep at bay the regional hegemonic ambitions of revisionist countries such as Iran and its allies. On top of that, as noted by Yossef (2021), the Accords also serve another strategic interest of the U.S. since they prevent Russian and Chinese penetration within the Middle East while maintaining a lighter American footprint in the region. These are the reasons why the Trump administration invested so much political capital in this diplomatic effort.

In order to convince the Arab states to sign the Accords the Trump administration initiated negotiations with the UAE for Abu Dhabi's purchase of the fifth-generation F-35 Joint Strike Fighter (Yossef 2021). It removed Sudan from the list of state sponsors of terrorism (Mohiedeen, 2020). It reversed the U.S. long-standing foreign policy for North Africa by announcing that Washington would recognise the sovereignty of Morocco over Western Sahara (Bradley, 2021), thus creating a regional knock-on effect that also echoed in Europe.

However, despite the commitment of the United States to implement the Abraham Accords, the series of events resulting from the attack on 7 October 2023 has resulted in consequences directly countering the strategic needs of Washington. In other words, instead of allowing for stability and a reduced U.S. strategic commitment, the Accords have backfired and destabilised the area, thus, forcing the U.S. to temporarily increase its military presence in the region. This is the result of the fact that, while economically beneficial for several Middle Eastern states, the Abraham Accords significantly divided Arab nations, fuelling sentiments of hostility and betrayal (Zafar et al., 2023). Norlen and Sinai (2020) prophetically pointed out before the eruption of hostilities that, by completely side-lining Palestinians' aspirations and imposing the diplomatic isolation of Iran, violent reactions were to be expected. Hamas' terrorist attacks were, in fact, most likely supported, if not directly sponsored, by Tehran, which aims to disrupt the pacification process and counter international efforts to strategically isolate Iran. Looking at how the Israeli-Hamas conflict is playing out, it is becoming fair to argue that Iran's strategic objectives are being successfully met to the detriment of Israeli and American interests.

Conclusion

Until a little more than a month ago, the Abraham Accords were still believed to be the greatest initiative in decades towards the achievement of peace and stability in the Middle East. They were particularly beneficial for the U.S. and Israel, as they allowed them to achieve their strategic goals with few repercussions. However, the Accords eventually achieved the opposite result, now an extended regional war with potentially disruptive global consequences has become more plausible. Instead of redirecting the naval assets of the U.S. toward the more strategically pivotal Indo-Pacific area, Washington had to deploy two aircraft carrier strike groups to the Eastern Mediterranean to deter Iran, Lebanon, Jordan, and other countries from joining the conflict (Hussain 2023). Even more importantly, Israel now stands in an impossible position where any actions taken may prove counterproductive. On the one hand, ending its war with Hamas without achieving a clear-cut strategic victory may be detrimental to its regional ambitions. To put it bluntly, a country unable to provide security to its own citizens is unlikely to be seen as a reliable regional powerhouse with the means to counter Iranian revisionist policies. On the other hand, continuing its military operations in Gaza, which have resulted in the deaths of a huge number of civilians, may also prove irremediably detrimental to Israel's efforts to replace the U.S. as a security provider in the region. As the war drags on with its shockingly high level of civilian casualties, public opinion of the Abraham Accords' signatory states will increasingly perceive Israel as an enemy rather than a potential strategic ally. Despite being non-democratic regimes, public opinion still plays a fundamental role within Arab States.

Under popular pressure, the UAE, Bahrain, and Saudi Arabia may abort the process of diplomatic, economic, and security rapprochement with Israel. With the failure of the Abraham Accords, instability, war, and widespread civilian suffering seem doomed to remain the defining features of the Middle East. The current spiral of violence and death in Gaza elucidates that peace cannot be achieved in this region as long as the Palestinian people and the Iranian security perspective do not become part of the equation.

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