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The Abraham Accords: Israel resizing Spheres of Influence

Abstract

Economics drive the Middle East, but this region has been a battle ground of several conflicts of indigenous nature, for decades. Military conflict in Yemen at one end and at the other, Syrian civil war, Lebanese political instability, and Palestinian-Israeli dispute, pose threats to regional peace. Israel is a democracy, looking for accreditation and acceptance in a region mostly held by monarchs who practice a different religion (Islam). Also, Israel's geo-strategic location does not favor this smaller country; thus, it has built superior military to avoid dangers to its integrity and has shown substantial economic growth and technological development to impact this politically troubled region. Is it the perfect time for Israel to resize its spheres of influence? Can Israel normalize its diplomatic relations with the Arab World in exchange of sharing industrial and technological advancement? In this paper, the peace deals signed between Israel-UAE, and Israel-Bahrain, commonly known as the Abraham Accords (AA), are to be analyzed in the light of these questions. This study aims to find out if the AA declaration has the potential to become the basis of peace in the Middle East owing to its religious, and political implications.

Keywords: Middle East, sphere of influence, peace, Abraham Accords

Introduction

On September 15, 2020 the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain and Israel signed the Abraham Accords, a U.S. brokered peace pact, to normalize their diplomatic relations (Guzansky & Marshall, 2020). With education, tourism, healthcare, security, and trade are included in the agenda; it becomes an education agreement, a tourism deal, a healthcare contract, a security pact, an economic and trade bond, and a fully functional, bilateral diplomatic treaty, nonetheless. It further extends to regional political and military situations (State Department, 2020), while addressing the conflict between Israel and Palestine only briefly; the name *Palestine* is mentioned in the draft only twice. The AA declaration was sealed on August 13, 2020 during a three-way phone call which involved former President of the United States of America, Donald J. Trump, Prime Minister of the state of Israel, Benjamin Netanyahu and Abu Dhabi's Crown Prince and Deputy Supreme Commander of the Armed Forces of United Arab Emirates, Sheikh Mohammed Bin Zayed Al Nahyan. Bahrain joined the treaty on September 11, 2020, just four days before its signing at the White House (BBC, 2020).

It is important to realize that establishing diplomatic relations is just a way of conducting diplomacy officially, as it may not be the objective of normalization, and recognizing other country also does not fully address the scale of bilateral cooperation (Sorkin, 2021). The United Arab Emirates was in contact with the Jewish state since long, and a backchannel diplomacy was continued. During such times, the government of UAE had been projecting the case of religious harmony, and regional peace. It officially provided numerous forums for interfaith dialogue, involving both public and private institutions, and for the promotion of tolerance and interfaith harmony, a ministry was formed in 2016, and the year 2019 was officially designated as the *Year of Peace* (Winter & Guzansky, 2020). Futuristically, the Abraham Accords will be significant in helping both UAE and Israel in influencing the whole region and "engaging in the US policy of *burden-sharing*" (Ketbi, 2020).

Objectives and Methodology

The Abraham Accords are more a strategy rather than a mere effort of normalizing regional relationship and conducting diplomacy. It is multifaceted and multidirectional, which involves several religious, regional, economic and military factors. First, it has religious connotations, which almost perfectly apply, not only to UAE, but also to all other Muslim countries. Israel requires recognition from Muslim states, and UAE, on the other hand, requires political upper hand in the region. Whereas, the Abraham Accords have global implications, nonetheless and, Bahrain proved to be the first regional beneficiary of such implications. If played right, the Abraham Accords may become the mother of all deals conducted between Israel and Muslim countries, in the future. It can also pave way for Saudi Arabia to join the peace accords any point in time, if circumstances require for it to practice partial of full normalization with Israel. Second, dealing with the Iranian factor is more convenient for Israel if Arab countries

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are officially onboard. However, its futuristic repercussions must be deeply studied. “Since the outbreak of fighting in Yemen in 2015 and the signing of the nuclear agreement between Iran and the P5+1 in July of that year, the UAE has focused its resources on resisting a multitude of regional threats” (Ketbi, 2020). Third, Middle East economy is largely compromised because of indigenous conflicts, i.e., Israel-Palestine conflict, Israel-Syria conflict, Israel-Lebanon conflict, and nonetheless, the *alleged* Iran factor in Saudi Arabia-Yemen relations, in the form of Houthi Movement. Consequences of striking a peace deal with Arab states for Israel, may alter the course of all these conflicts, or at least deter them in favor of the Jewish state.

The current study is multifaceted, but not all the issues can be individually addressed consequentially, hence, a generic stage set of social, political, military and religious implications was put forth as an effort to provided basis for further study. Owing to the current nature of the Abraham Accords, both quantitative and qualitative methods were equally considered with a deductive approach. For the collection of data, all primary and secondary sources were considered, many of which were news items, newspaper articles, and op-eds. The study is neither proposing or suggesting a data-driven model of diplomatic or military implications of the Abraham Accords, nor it is based on statistical data assessment, but it was to understand the current scenarios of cooperation, collaboration, and consequences of political propositions, which made the nature of this study largely descriptive, and all the analysis was put forth in a simpler social perspective. Although flexibility, of the content and analysis, was considered to support the descriptive element of the content and improve clarity, but the study is mainly cross-sectional, bound to idealogues, and deals with specific points in time.

Religious significance

To go deep in researching for the right reasons for choosing the name, *Abraham Accords*, is like peeling an onion, for this is multidimensional, mysterious and highly diplomatic. In other words, the name was chosen for the right reasons. The AA declarations represent commonalities between the religious history of three most influential, monotheistic religions of the World i.e., Islam, Judaism and Christianity. All these three religions are also known as *Abrahamic religions*. It may also be a representation to honor the patriarch of Islam, Judaism and Christianity, the Prophet Abraham; also known as the *father of prophets*. “The normalization process between Israel and UAE, under American sponsorship, was fashioned in this reconciliatory spirit, and in part is marketed as a renewed religious rapprochement between Muslims, Jews, and Christians” (Winter & Guzansky, 2020).

All Abrahamic religions find their roots in the region of Palestine. So, it also depicts that the deal is directly addressing the chronic issue between Palestine and Israel. As the prophet Abraham represents the *parenthood of prophets*, the Abraham Accords represent a *parent agreement* of Israel with two states situated in the Arabian Peninsula. The Abraham Accords sketch a peace pact between the descendants of the Prophet Abraham’s first child and the descendants of the second child. So, both are close relatives not the distant cousins. The name also depicts a correlation between the history of migrations and settlements of the three Abrahamic religions, stretched over thousands of years. The very name has a potential to catch more Arabian states to come forth and join the terms of the *parent agreement*.

As the name suggests, a liberal Jewish state and Arab monarchs have taken refuge in religious connotations for constructing the basis of their relationships. It paves way for liberalists and neo-liberalists to look through the futuristic aspects of diplomatic ties forming through religious normative. While the world is setting (or claims to set) religion aside, moving fast towards political, strategic, and technological advancement and questioning the motives of existing religious conservatives, this peace pact has given open grounds for further study through religious lenses. However, one thing is obvious that even the most liberal states are religiously deep-rooted and, in other words, conservative. The UAE’s religious bodies have concluded that the best answer, to why the deal with Israel was struck, would be in the name of their country’s national interest and for this they have devised a religious connotation, as “the principal argument cited in the ruling by the Emirates Fatwa Council, the country’s supreme religious authority, was that the agreement with Israel is *maslaha* (literally: an interest), an act that safeguards one or more of the fundamental goals of the sharia (Islamic law)”, and also it has been portrayed that “the argument between the two sides demonstrates that Islam as a religion has no consensual stance on peace and normalization with Israel” (Winter & Guzansky, 2020).

Economic impact

The name, *Abraham Accords*, suggest for researchers to revisit global economy through religious perspective. It is highly likely that they would find a lot more instances than usual where conservative religious beliefs have become basis for modern liberal ideologies. In other words, *religious diplomacy is driving liberal economy*, which seems to be true at least for the Middle East. Imagine Christians without the Vatican, Jews without

the Western Wall, or Muslims without the Makkah, would it not be disastrous religiously, and how devastating its economic impact would be.

Only two Arab countries had ties with Israel, before UAE and Bahrain, but none of them belongs to the Arabian Peninsula; Egypt, the African Arab country, normalized its relations with the Jewish state in 1979 and Jordan had its friendliness with the Judeans in 1994 where both countries are situated in Fertile Crescent region (Sorkin, 2021). Israel had been looking for ways to step in the Arabian Peninsula since long. It had opened doors for back-channel-diplomacy, citing political and economic pores to seep in gradually as well as effectively. It has its technology, modernization, economic and military might to offer in return of getting hold of flourishing Arabian businesses, and exploit in its favor the communication, education, and defense markets. “Along with the desire to attain untapped profits, the UAE and Israel also pursued economic ties due to the initiative of private individuals and organizations aiming to improve relations between the two countries” (Sorkin, 2021). “The bilateral trade and economic exchanges between Israel and the UAE thus far are only the tip of the iceberg in terms of the economic potential of these accords, ...economic integration in the form of a comprehensive FTA (Free Trade Agreement) that eliminates tariffs, lowers investment and nontariff barriers, and waives visa requirements can have much larger benefits” (Egel, Efron, & Robinson, 2021). Certainly, over the years, UAE has become the economic hub of the Arabian Peninsula, but politically, it was not as influential as the Jewish state. However, making headlines and surprising the world of analysis and opinions after striking the deal with Israel (apparently in urgency), UAE not only gained politically but also added much to its diplomatic sphere of influence. For Arab states, UAE is now a communication portal between the Arab world and Israel. It can influence states like Qatar, Oman, and Yemen, and hypothetically, many other Muslim states with ease. Economically speaking, “the UAE in particular has influenced global governance by pursuing its robust, long-term risk diversification policy” (Ketbi, 2020).

The Saudi factor and beyond

Saudi Arabia has already been accused of being involved in back-channel-diplomacy with Israel and advocating normalization through media as “MBC, a Saudi-owned network, was accused of “promoting normalization” with Israel despite its decades-long occupation of Palestinian and Arab territories, as well as its systematic abuse of Palestinians still under its military control” (Younes, 2020). News on off-the-scene friendly contacts between the two apparent enemies had regularly been coming to surface. Myre (2006) had reported with reference to an Israeli newspaper that Ehud Olmert had secretive meetings with Saudi officials on Iranian threat and Cook (2017) reported that leaked Israeli diplomatic cables suggest Netanyahu instructed its overseas embassies to support Saudi Arabia against Iranian regime. This means that if Iran remains a threat, Saudi Arabia and Israel may join to neutralize it. Also, the ongoing friendship between Al Nahyan and Muhammad Bin Salman can lead to a further breakthrough.

But Saudi Arabia finds itself in wrong waters diplomatically because ties with Israel, as far as its long-standing foreign policy, and reservations of most of the Muslim countries are concerned, depend upon peace accord with the Palestinians. Saudi Arabia reiterated that Israel's unilateral actions regarding West Bank settlements are obstacles to the Middle East peace as Faisal bin Farhan Al Saud, the Saudi Arabian Foreign Minister spoke in favor of the Kingdom's decades long commitment to go on with the Arab Peace Plan of 2002, committing “peace must be achieved with the Palestinians” first (AFP, 2020). The United States also expects Saudis to join the AA deal. The U.S. President Donald J. Trump has already suggested for them, to forge a relationship with their *stepbrother*, to find new diplomatic and economic horizons mentioning that “countries that you wouldn't even believe want to come into that deal” (Zargham, 2020).

The UAE-Bahrain-Israel deal has made an impact and if this impact lasts long, Riyadh is not far from opening its doors for the state of Israel's embassy. The statements of leaders belonging to both the countries, in the past, suggest it has already begun. The region seems to be in an urgent requirement to move forward strategically, and it can be assessed from the fact that the Abraham Accords were absorbed by the Arab world with a mysterious calm.

Regional security implications

UAE was involved in *no war* with the Jewish state hence its ties with Israel will have long lasting impact over the region, which are thought to bring *warm peace* as the UAE deems to gain benefits in the long term over a smaller adaptable set of regional hurdles and obstructions. The UAE's embassy will be in Tel Aviv rather than in Jerusalem (Aljazeera, 2021). As Israel considers Jerusalem its undivided capital, UAE's decision to settle in Tel Aviv is meant to give Palestinians a message of *peace and negotiations*. Israel's spy agency Mossad's chief Yossi Cohen, immediately after the deal was struck, visited UAE. Both countries now have eyes on internal and regional security as “the Abraham Accords amount to an arms deal” besides other spheres and “the U.S. has pledged for a

very long time to maintain Israel's qualitative military edge, but the UAE might have just arranged for itself a similar promise" (Goldberg, 2020).

The UAE-Israel *coalition* for the so-called *regional good*, and joining of Bahrain, is just an initiation. Israel is resizing its political and diplomatic spheres of influence. On one hand, Israel is fulfilling its military agreements with Turkey, and this normalization will be a teasing message for Tehran (Tokyay, 2020), and on the other; its Air Force is flying and maneuvering in the German air space (Sang, 2018) and that "crushing sense of isolation that Israelis feel in their own neighborhood may be partially lifted by this agreement" (Goldberg, 2020). Futuristically speaking, the Abraham Accords are the initiating steps for Israel that lead towards making the Jewish state a global player as Netanyahu "manages to make *peace* with Arabs who are not Palestinians" (Goldberg, 2020). But it is important what Tamara Cofman Wittes, of the Brookings Institution's Center for Middle East Policy, figured out that "Donald Trump suggested that there might be some other outcome that could deliver a lasting peace" (Wittes, 2017).

The Question of Palestine

After striking the deal with Israel, the UAE became the first Gulf state to maintain full relations with Israel. The deal, Abraham Accords, however, call "to advance comprehensive Middle East peace, stability and prosperity" (State Department, 2020) that actually addresses "legitimate needs and aspirations of both peoples" (State Department, 2020), i.e., Israelites and Palestinians. After the Abraham Accords, Israel's plan to annex the Jordan Valley is suspended. However, the Prime Minister of the Jewish state called it temporary; in fact, he called its suspension "for the time being", and he further exclaimed that suspending Jordan Valley annexation was demanded by the United States. Netanyahu stressed that the annexation plan is still *on the table* (BBC, 2020).

The issue, however, stays there. Was the Palestinian question compromised after UAE's deal with Israel? The Palestinians called it a betrayal. What will happen if "any improvement in the Gulf and Israel relations will only take place at the Palestinians' costs" (Rehman, 2020). The Palestinian Authority has already, categorically, rejected and denied the deal between the two countries. It condemned the peace accord and extensively criticized the UAE's decisions (ReutersConnect, 2020). On September 22, the Palestinian Authority that had to chair Arab League's meeting for another six months, conceded "its right to chair the League's council [of foreign ministers] (Aljazeera, 2020).

The story of the acceptance or rejection of any peace accord is often told by the local and international reactions. The world mostly reacted in favor of the treaty, starting from Oman and Bahrain, where both the Gulf states publicly praised and favored the pact (BBC, 2020), which Yousef Al Otaiba, UAE's ambassador to the U.S. called "a win for diplomacy and for the region" (Zweiri, 2020), and claimed that they received "overwhelming positive reaction from the United Nations and more than 40 other countries around the world" insisting that "this agreement immediately puts an end to Israel's plans for the annexation of Palestinian lands and maintains the viability of the two-state solution" (Al-Otaiba, 2020), to which Palestinians think, and responded pretty differently.

Conclusion

By choosing 'Abraham Accords' as the name, an effort has been made to find the 'right mid-eastern connection' between religions and politics to drive economy. The Abraham Accords primarily address the bilateral ties of countries bound to its fate and do not directly take up the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. So, the AA declaration cannot be seen from the perspective of the Palestinian people although it has significantly wider regional implications. The primary draft of the Abraham Accords stress on the *commitment* to achieve *comprehensive, realistic and enduring peace*, which can be later harnessed to attain a long-lasting regional peace. UAE-Bahrain-Israel deal has put the Muslim world under pressure which greatly favors Israel. It gives the Jewish state natural grounds to expand its spheres of influence and aggressively challenge enemies, such as Iran, politically as well as militarily.

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