



The Abraham Accords and the WMD-Free Zone in the Middle East

Roundtable Report

On 15 December 2020, the Geneva Centre for Security Policy (GCSP) and Middle East Treaty Organization (METO) held a joint roundtable on the impact of the recent Abraham Accords on the process for a WMD-Free Zone in the Middle East. The roundtable was held under the Chatham House rule with participation by leading security and WMD non-proliferation experts, policymakers, activists and academics from across the region and beyond. The current report summarises the points made and the discussions held at this event.

Rationale

The Abraham Accords were reached on 13 August 2020 between Israel, the United States and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and subsequently extended to include Bahrain, Sudan, and Morocco with the door open for other Arab states to join. Early analysis has addressed the Accords cautiously, suggesting that they could be more of a by-product of the US elections, an anti-Iranian coalition, or a glorified arms deal, rather than a major turning point in the region. The Accords, however, are long-term deals that will have an impact on Arab-Israeli relations, security and economic cooperation, and on the Arab Peace Initiative, which aimed to put a resolution to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict as the gateway for normalization. This could ultimately lead to a new balance of power in the region. It is still to be seen how the Accords will be translated into actions, yet the agreements and their potential impact on different levels—particularly in relation to regional security issues and the WMD-free Zone in the Middle East—are worth examining.



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The Abraham Accords

The Abraham Accords cover a range of areas, while there is debate over whether it is a peace deal or an arrangement. The view from the leadership in UAE and Bahrain is that the Arab world has exhausted the war and conflict path to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian issue and it is time to pursue a new tactic (while claiming to maintain their commitment to the Palestinian cause). These overtures seem to be incentivized by the transactional nature of the Abraham Accords, with each country seeking something tangible in return from the United States for normalization with Israel.

The Accords are also a final push by the Trump administration to set the norm (as has been seen when Trump recognised Jerusalem as Israel's capital and Israeli sovereignty over the Golan Heights) and to make a mark before leaving office.

It is important to note that the Abraham Accords are three separate (short) documents: one 200-word statement; a one-page long declaration of peace; and a Peace Treaty between Sudan and Israel. They touch on tolerance, cooperation and tacit inclusion of security cooperation. They, however, go beyond the peace treaties with Egypt and Jordan that were complex, long documents and involved a considerable amount of negotiations and political will.

Let's take a brief look at the deals made between Israel and the four Arab countries:

UAE (Signed 13 August 2020)

Following the signing of the Accord between the UAE and Israel, it became clear that it rests a great deal on UAE finally receiving the green light for the coveted F35 fighter jet. President Trump went as far as threatening to veto any Congressional action that could halt the sale of the fighter jets. Israel on the other hand continues to accelerate its illegal settlement expansion with an additional 5,000 permits issued since the Accords.

Bahrain (Signed 15 September 2020)

It is not immediately clear what are the incentives for Bahrain to join the Accords but it seems that it is being used as a proxy for Saudi Arabia—as the Kingdom is currently not in a position to join the Accords and is the initiator of the 2002 Arab Peace Initiative. We also have to bear in mind that Bahrain is the host of the Manama Conference initiated as part of the Trump Peace Plan.

Sudan (23 October 2020)

Sudan and Israel agreed to normalize relations on 23 October 2020—with the Sudanese government awaiting local legislators to approve it. This agreement was in the making and the signs were there. Sudan sought to be removed from the US list of state sponsors of terrorism and for that to happen they needed to pay \$335 million in compensation for victims of terrorism (the bombings of the American embassies in Kenya and Tanzania in 1998 and the USS Cole in 2000). Once the Sudanese government paid the amount on 22 October 2020, President Trump issued an executive order and Sudan was no longer on the US list of state sponsors of terrorism. The next day, the deal with Israel was reached. There is, however, domestic opposition to the agreement in Sudan and historical animosity between the two countries could jeopardize the agreement. Also, Khartoum is where the Arab League signed the resolution (in 1967) against Israel, known as the 'three noes': no peace, no recognition and no negotiations.

Morocco (10 December 2020)

Morocco and Israel have maintained some level of bilateral relations for decades, with this latest agreement further deepening their relationship. The latest normalization agreement between the two countries was

followed the next day with President Trump recognizing Morocco's claim over Western Sahara. This decision may further complicate the negotiations with the Polisario Front, supported by the Algerian government.

Morocco's official position

The questions of relations with Israel and that of Western Sahara are completely separate. This is a re-launch since both countries have had relations since 1994 and have exchanged embassies. While there have been periods of severed relations, dialogue was always alive. These are two different issues.

Regarding Western Sahara: the US has backed autonomy for Western Sahara for 13 years, but the latest announcement confirms the official and legal sovereignty of Morocco over those provinces. While this is a historical turn around, it had nothing to do with Israel. Meanwhile, it has been a decade since any UNSC resolution regarding the referendum in the Western Sahara. It is important to note that while the EU can play a constructive role in this matter, the UNSC deals with these issues and considers the autonomy plan as the most credible.

Regarding the WMDFZ: Morocco is an active supporter of the Zone, aspires to be a member, and considers its realization as paramount to address four key issues:

1. Tackling nuclear terrorism – a matter that is paramount for collective security.
2. The move towards nuclear disarmament worldwide through the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW). While Morocco is not a party yet, it is something that Rabat is considering seriously.
3. The security of the Zone itself is linked to global security and wider regional security. The Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) process remains a very important framework for recalling and redefining efforts for the Zone.
4. The consequences of establishing relations between Arab countries and Israel. This is a positive development that could create a better atmosphere for more in-depth discussions on issues of common security.

Follow-up questions to consider:

- What will be the position of the incoming Biden Administration on the Abraham Accords: will there be continuity or change?
- On other policy areas will there be emphasis on arms control or disarmament and will the Biden Administration embrace multilateralism and a return to the JCPOA?
- What role can and should the EU play as a global actor, in particular considering the EU's influence and weight in the Mediterranean Region?
- What impact will UAE's access to F-35 aircraft have on an arms race? Qatar has also asked for access to F-35s. Meanwhile, could it spur Iran's capabilities as it is threatened by the Accords?
- Implications on military spending by Gulf States. Defence budgets have jumped enormously and Saudi Arabia and Bahrain have diversified their suppliers. In the region, will the impact be increased proliferation?
- What are the views on the Accord from key regional players: the Arab League, Iran, Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and Israel's neighbours?
- Does normalization provide tacit approval of Israel's nuclear arsenal and weaken calls for disarmament?
- Do the Accords provide further incentive for Israel and the US to engage in the Zone process (November 2021)?
- What are the implications of the Accords on the Palestinian-Israeli peace process and the Arab Peace Initiative?

The WMD-Free Zone

The driving force for establishing a WMD-Free Zone in the Middle East has always centred on Israel's nuclear weapons and related grievances. Israel neither confirms nor denies its nuclear weapons. It is, however, believed to possess between 80-90 nuclear weapons according to SIPRI. Israel is not a party to the NPT, but instead of triggering proliferation, it led regional countries to initially call for a Nuclear Weapons Free Zone in the Middle East (NWFZ) since the 1970s. Then in 1990, the NWFZ was expanded to include all weapons of mass destruction for the establishment of the WMD-Free Zone in the Middle East. A primary reason to include all WMD was to remove the sole focus on Israel and its nuclear arsenal and reduce Israel's interest in nuclear weapons by eliminating chemical and biological weapons.

The WMDFZ has played a central role since the 1995 NPT Review Conference and the indefinite extension of the treaty. In addition to creating a zone, the indefinite extension also called on States Parties and the Nuclear-Weapon States (NWS) to expand their efforts to achieve one. Arab states were influential in setting the agenda in 1995 and instrumental in the indefinite extension—with many member states joining the NPT because they thought the Israeli nuclear monopoly and imbalance would be addressed. It was hoped that the Zone would make a difference and alter the US position on the issue.

Another process initiated to improve the prospects for the Zone was the first and only arms control process in the region known as the Arms Control and Regional Security (ACRS). It began following the Madrid process but collapsed due to the differences between Egypt and Israel ('disarmament first' or 'peace first').

What remained from ACRS was the expanded focus from nuclear weapons to all WMD and their delivery vehicles. This shifted the focus further away from Israel to include others with WMD.

The hopes of the Zone through the NPT process turned into disappointment as it was never implemented. There was an agreement during the 2010 NPT Review Conference to convene a meeting on the Zone in 2012. The United States, however, cancelled the meeting voicing concerns over singling out Israel and that the region was not ready for a constructive discussion.

In 2015 NPT Review Conference, the United States along with Canada and the UK vetoed the final document that called for a Zone conference in 2016. This resulted in the Arab group initiating a process through the UN General Assembly calling for a UN-based conference on the establishment of the Zone. This was similar to the TPNW process.

The first UN conference on the WMD Free Zone took place in November 2019. Participation included 23 states from the region (with the sole exception of Israel) along with four out of the five NWS (except the United States). This conference will be held annually until there is a legally binding treaty. The 2020 conference has been postponed due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Sceptics have dismissed the significance of the process, as they consider the process pointless without the participation of Israel. However, there is a precedent for this: the Treaty of Tlatelolco took the same path, negotiating a treaty without Brazil and Argentina. Nevertheless, the strengthened commitment against WMD would be good for regional security in the light of recent uses of chemical weapons in the region.

In addition to the normative process, Israelis will have incentives to join. Their preconditions have remained the same: regional security and recognition of Israel by neighbours. Israel referred to the proliferation threat as the reason why any attempts to establish the Zone are premature.

The policy of Israel has been contradictory. Along with some Arab states, notably Saudi Arabia, they have opposed the JCPOA—whereas the Iran Nuclear Deal was the best way of preventing Iran from acquiring a nuclear weapon. They both objected because of the perceived increase of Iranian influence and improved

relations with the United States. Interestingly, with the Abraham Accords, Israel has partly achieved what it wanted (recognition) without making any concessions on the Palestinian issue or the Zone.

Follow-up questions to consider:

- What are the impacts of the Abraham Accords on the WMDFZ conversation, on the November Conference process, and on the NPT?
- What are the opportunities? What might harm the process?
- With the Accords, is there any pressure on Iran to change its stand regarding the Zone?
- What about the Abraham Accords under the Biden presidency?
- In the November Conference will there be alliances between those in the Abraham Accords and those who are not?
- What are the broader security implications?
- How will it spill over to the November Conference?

Political and security implications of the Accords and on the Zone

The political ramifications of the Abraham Accords and implications for the Zone moving forward: what is perceived to be a rush from states obscures another dynamic which is a hardening of attitudes and backlash against the Abraham Accords by Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, Algeria and possibly Qatar. This can result in the rejection of any normalisation of relationships with Israel. Such a split can also result in hardening of attitudes by some countries such as Iran.

Meanwhile, such developments can complicate the politics related to the November Conference process. There can also be complications with regards to the substance of the Zone negotiations. The example here is the persistent Israeli demand for security discussions first, prior to disarmament.

The possible weakening of regional consensus: this has to do with the nature of the Abraham Accords and the recent normalisation. The key factor is that, unlike the peace treaties with Egypt and Jordan, the Abraham Accords are not conventional peace agreements. The Egypt and Jordan peace deals were very complex frameworks that included processes for conflict resolution and even peacekeeping forces in the Sinai. The Abraham Accords, meanwhile, are simpler documents—precisely because there is no history of direct conflict between the signatory states and Israel.

However, the significance is that these countries used to be part of the Arab consensus that linked normalisation with Israel to the Palestine issue. The Abraham Accords, thus, have managed to break the Arab consensus. Similarly, they could also weaken the consensus on the Zone issue.

The emerging security dynamics as they pertain to the Abraham Accords dynamic: the Abraham Accords are not part of a conflict resolution process. They are purely transactional arms deals or delisting from US list of state sponsors of terrorism. Everyone is unabashed about these deals. For example, the UAE openly acknowledges the transactions.

The Accords also have distinct security logic. The security dimension in the Abraham Accords is explicit within them. In the text they refer to a strategic agenda for the Middle East and they mix security matters with other elements such as trade, recognition, peace, etc. Although, the Accords implicitly take aim against Iran, it is broader than that. Signatory states have determined that the response to Iran is not through the JCPOA or the Zone, but instead through an opposition to Iran's regional ambitions. They have opted for a new dynamic of more militarisation and an insecurity dilemma moving forward.

Observations

Possible impact the Abraham Accords will have on the November Conference: there seems to be unity amongst Arab countries and Iran in criticising Israel within the NPT process. While outside of the NPT, Arab countries feel closer to Israel against Iran as the common enemy. Will a similar development occur at the November Conference?

The Abraham Accords will negatively impact the Zone:

- The process thus far tries to build agreements on WMD, particularly nuclear weapons, by using the threat of non-cooperation.
- Egypt joined the NPT in the 1990s on the understanding that Israel would follow suit, but Israel has entrenched its position with backing from the United States. A source of frustration.
- If the Accords were a method to woo Israel into a multilateral approach, then it might be a constructive move. But it's not. It will embolden Israel and extreme elements in the United States to maintain an exceptionalist view.
- We're moving away from a WMDFFZ because the Abraham Accords confirm Israel as an accepted nuclear-weapon state.
- Despite the Accords and their potential positive implications, the current internal political situation in Israel as well as the predicted one in the near future rule out any real progress towards the Zone. Regardless of the fate of Netanyahu, the Israeli right wing will gain more power in the next election and its leaders have no intention of giving up the nuclear option and instead will demand lasting peace agreements with regional states, including Iran and Iraq as a precondition for discussions.

The Abraham Accords will positively impact the Zone:

- Call out the Abraham Accords for what they don't say and to call upon states to make more explicit the link between peace with Israel and Israel making a better relationship with the international community. If it were like this the Abraham Accords would be an incredible force for good.
- The Abraham Accords do have one silver lining. They test the validity and credibility of Israel's 'long-corridor' approach. Israel insists they can't engage with disarmament until others move down the corridor. It is well known that this is a rhetorical device to delay discussions on its nuclear weapons and is driven by Israel's need for absolute security. The international community, however, can now challenge Israel as the Abraham Accords show that several strides have been taken down the long corridor. Can this nudge Israel towards the Zone process?

The Abraham Accords are based on geopolitical realities not a love affair between Israel and Arab states. It is rather to contain and weaken their common regional enemy, Iran. This could be the beginning of forming a security alliance against Iran—that includes the sole nuclear-weapon state of the region. But would Israel accept to apply such extended deterrence to Arab countries?

Does Israel become another factor in security dynamics? There has been a tacit security regime between Israel and these Arab countries moving forward.

The Abraham Accords are abandoning Palestinian interests and placing no demands on Israel to make concessions. This development has weakened the Arab Peace Initiative and Arab consensus, and possibly made them irrelevant.

There is a high percentage of the Israeli population that supports the Abraham Accords. As was the case with peace agreements with Egypt and Jordan, there is renewed hope that with the Abraham Accords Israel will have an incentive to make progress on peace negotiations with the Palestinians.

Iran's regional security proposal: the international community should test the validity of the Iran proposal for regional security, the "Hormuz peace plan" proposed in 2019 by Iranian Foreign Minister Zarif and President Rouhani, aiming at "durable peace and security" in the Gulf region without extra-regional powers.

The Biden Administration:

- There is expectation that the new Biden Administration will return to multilateralism and prioritize arms control—particularly regarding the New START and JCPOA.
- US foreign policy regarding the Middle East is likely to have a strong undercurrent of continuity—it is likely to continue during the Biden presidency. This could be reflected in arms control and security, particularly in relations with Israel and by extension the US position on the Zone.
- Renewed efforts by the Biden Administration on addressing the faltering JCPOA will have widespread security implications for the region. Since the Iranian nuclear file is intimately linked to regional security concerns, how will the Biden Administration ensure that the link is maintained and not separated, as was the case during the Obama Administration? Separating the two issues remained a key issue for some regional countries and played a key part in the current regional reshuffling that led to the Abraham Accords.

Concluding Remarks

The Abraham Accords clearly are a significant development within the region. The region has been characterised as divided and where the prospects for change are dim and where it has been difficult to see progress. Suddenly the Abraham Accords come out of an experience of four years of negative diplomacy from Washington, coinciding with the US efforts (or desire) to extract itself militarily from the region.

The Abraham Accords are difficult to read, and that will be the case for the foreseeable future. There is also speculation on whether the new Biden Administration will strengthen or weaken the Accords. In this realignment, the Abraham Accords could lead to an arms race, increasing military spending and with it regional tensions.

Where that takes us, we don't know.

The question of whether the Abraham Accords will increase Israel's confidence in the region, giving stronger possibility of engaging in constructive change, including the eventual elimination of nuclear weapons, depends on how the Abraham Accords and other things change the nature of the relationship of Israel with its neighbours, the non-Abraham Accord states. While it seems that the region has taken several steps down the 'long corridor', it is unlikely that Israel will disarm under pressure and there's no prospect for disarmament in the near future. Yet, the situation for Israel has improved without making concessions.

Rather than black-and-white choices and a polarised perspective, it is not clear whether the Zone is closer or further away, the question is: what features can states strengthen that will entice Israel and Iran and others in the region to treat the Zone more seriously?

If the Abraham Accords throw things up in the air, it allows states to reassess whether their future includes WMD.