

## The Abraham Accords two years on: from ambition to reality

**Leonardo Jacopo Maria Mazzucco** | Researcher at TRENDS Research & Advisory (Abu Dhabi) and Research Assistant at Gulf State Analytics | @mazz\_Leonardo 

**Dr Kristian Alexander** | Senior Fellow at TRENDS Research & Advisory (Abu Dhabi).

### Theme

Two years on, the Abraham Accords seem to have become stuck between their ambitious hopes and the constraints imposed by reality.

### Summary

Two years ago, on 13 August 2020, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Israel and the US released a joint statement publicly announcing the normalisation of diplomatic relations between the two Middle Eastern countries. On 15 September 2020 the Emirati Foreign Minister, Sheikh Abdullah bin Zayed, and the Israeli Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, signed the peace agreement known as the Abraham Accords at an official ceremony chaired by the former US President Donald Trump at the White House.

The formalisation of the UAE-Israel entente has brought about a major reconfiguration of the political and security makeup of the Middle East by broadening the scope of Israel's allies in the Arabian Peninsula. The Emirati and Israeli leaderships welcomed the Abraham Accords and presented the diplomatic achievement to their citizens as a powerful political construct that would allow the two countries to better deliver on their national priorities. Although the normalisation deal has brought about unprecedented opportunities for cooperation between the UAE and Israel during the past two years, differences in their strategic interests have ultimately come to the surface and slowed down the initial momentum. Whether these constraints become a major hurdle for fully implementing the accords remains to be seen. For the time being, with the Abraham Accords finding a way out of the current limbo, the two countries are showing a solid commitment to consolidating their roles in regional and global affairs.

### Analysis

#### (1) The small state with big ambitions

The mounting activism of the United Arab Emirates (UAE) on the international stage stems from the unprecedented independence secured by Abu Dhabi over the last decade. The UAE does not see its small size as an obstacle to its political ambitions but as a strength. The so-called 'Little Sparta' uses the political and military flexibility with which it has been endowed by geography—reduced borders to patrol and defend, and streamlined command and control structures—but acts and adopts the strategies of a middle-sized power. By engaging on an equal footing with major regional state actors

such as Iran, Saudi Arabia and Turkey, the UAE has signalled to its enemies and friends alike that it is determined to act as a middle-sized state in the regional power game.

After a decades-long standoff in Arab-Israeli relations, the Abraham Accords broke the taboo enshrined in the Saudi-inspired 2002 Arab Peace Initiative that full diplomatic ties between Israel and the Arab countries would be conditional on Israel's recognition of a Palestinian state. The UAE is now a model for like-minded states in the Middle East: while Bahrain, Morocco and Sudan have each made their own decision to normalise relations with Israel on the basis of domestic, regional and international factors peculiar to their political makeup, the UAE has demonstrated its leadership and a capacity to influence high-profile regional political matters.

A desire to boost its international standing and leadership credentials motivated the UAE to negotiate the Abraham Accords, but the move was also an acknowledgment by the Emirati leadership that the transformations underway in the regional order required the deployment of a new set of tools. The government could see that the foreign policy strategies that had worked in the past had become less effective, so it switched gears to better address its political and economic considerations at the domestic level.

## (2) Planning for a future without the US

The normalisation of diplomatic ties between the UAE and Israel has come at a delicate time for the US's relations with its partners in the Middle East. Since the Obama Administration, the US's core vital economic interests have gradually pivoted from the Middle East to Asia, triggering inevitable readjustments in its foreign and defence policies. This has led to a severe confidence crisis in Washington from its Middle East partners, who are concerned about the ramifications for regional security of its recalibration of strategic priorities and overseas military footprint. They are concerned about a winding down of the US military presence in the Middle East and have entered into new partnerships to fill the perceived security vacuum. The Abraham Accords are an example of such a partnership, with Washington playing a pivotal role and a vested interest in seeing its regional partners team up and share the security burden.

## (3) Unlikely partners, until now

The desire for a closer partnership between the UAE and Israel stems from three major factors: (1) a strategic calculation; (2) breaking diplomatic isolation; and (3) fostering economic cooperation. Although the fence-mending between Israel and the UAE is first and foremost a political affair, the leadership in both countries has been keen to carefully craft a diplomacy of reconciliation between Muslims and Jews and branding it as an example of tolerance and religious coexistence.

### (3.1) Strategic calculation

The UAE and Israel both look at regional dynamics through a conservative prism. Political upheavals are considered a source of instability and a threat to domestic security, while those interested in challenging the current regional balance of power are viewed as pressing concerns. As a result, Abu Dhabi and Tel Aviv have generally shared

a hostile attitude towards radicals and an overall consensus on the imperative of containing their ambitions.

The wave of regime instability and political turmoil brought about by the Arab uprisings in 2011 heightened the threat perception of leaders in the UAE and Israel. With armed confrontation wreaking havoc in the region and the Arab streets bringing to an end several long-standing regimes, insurgent and terrorist groups rooted in the Jihadi-Salafi ideology and political Islam tradition and prominent powerhouses, such as Iran and Turkey, sought to exploit the power vacuum caused by regime failure and create an alternative political order that aligned with their strategic interests. The proliferation of these multi-faceted threats and Washington's de-prioritisation of the Middle East compelled the Emiratis and Israelis to become more serious about their joint efforts to counter threats to the regional power balance and the survival of their regimes.

The UAE and Israel have gradually engaged in an increasing cooperation in the military and defence sectors. During the past two years the Emirati-Israeli security forces have engaged in combined drill and intelligence sharing. In early November 2021 the UAE and Israel took part in a US-led naval exercise in the Red Sea along with Bahrain, and this five-day maritime drill was the first time the Emirati and Israeli navies had held training operations together. They also participated in the International Maritime Exercise 2022, an 18-day naval exercise in February that brought together 60 nations led by the US Naval Forces Central Command. Another illustration of the strategic achievements that can be attained through diplomatic pacts such as the Abraham Accords was the report that the US-Israeli integrated air defence system featuring Israeli-made early warning radar systems had been or could be deployed in the UAE and Bahrain.

### *(3.2) Breaking diplomatic isolation*

As small-size powers endowed with limited military capability in terms of conventional warfare, the UAE and Israel have recurrently sought to offset this unbalance through a mix of policies aimed at strengthening combat readiness while establishing positive diplomatic ties with neighbouring countries. From the UAE's perspective, building up a close partnership with Israel brings a number of benefits, from a more favourable reputation with the US public to a stronger relationship with US centres of power. The Israeli lobby in Washington, and especially in the US Congress, is thought to play a significant role in facilitating arms procurement deals for the UAE. The fact that Israel did not veto the sale to the UAE of the Lockheed Martin-made F-35 fighter jet, a fifth-generation combat aircraft known for its cutting-edge stealth technology, is a case in point. Thanks to its constructive engagement with Israel, the UAE is in a more favourable position in Washington to seal contracts for weapon systems that until the Abraham Accords were less accessible.

Israel has long coveted the idea of building full diplomatic relationships with its Arab neighbours to break the regional isolation burdening the country since its establishment in 1948. Historically, Tel Aviv has been keen to reverse the image of Israel as a foreign entity in the Middle East and attempted to gain official recognition from Arab countries. By enlarging its group of friendly countries through the Abraham Accords, Israel has

strengthened its political standing in the region, which is strategically important considering its hostile neighbours.

### *(3.3) Economic cooperation*

The normalisation of diplomatic ties between the UAE and Israel has created a positive environment for economic engagement to flourish. Between bilateral trade and investment deals, business is booming, especially in key industries such as advanced weapons systems, artificial intelligence, renewable energy, smart farming and cyber capabilities. The transfer of technologies and the launching of joint projects to develop state-of-the-art solutions has nurtured mutual trust between Emiratis and Israelis.

On 11 March 2021 the two leading Emirati and Israeli weapons manufacturers, the UAE defence conglomerate EDGE and the Israeli Aerospace Industries (IAI), signed a memorandum of understanding to launch a programme for the production of an advanced drone defence system. Later in the year, on 18 November 2021, EDGE and IAI signed a second deal for a joint partnership, this time for unmanned vessels to be used by the military to carry out anti-submarine warfare and submarine detection operations. In late January 2022 the UAE and Israel launched a joint research and development investment fund to enhance cooperation between Emirati and Israeli companies in the high-tech sector. The two countries allocated approximately US\$4.7 million a year for 10 years to the fund, which aims to foster cooperation between Emirati and Israeli tech enterprises and develop trailblazing cyber-technology solutions.

Since the normalisation of diplomatic ties, UAE-Israeli commercial exchanges have recorded unprecedented growth, with annual bilateral trade reaching US\$1.2 billion in 2021. Economic exchanges between the two countries are expected to exceed US\$10 billion within the next five years, with growth fuelled by the [Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement](#) signed in Dubai by the Emirati and Israeli Ministers of Economy on 31 May 2022. The free trade deal aims to ease commercial exchanges, open up new market spheres for export products and facilitate investment opportunities by significantly reducing tariffs and other economic barriers.

## *(4) Disagreeing on what was agreed: UAE and Israeli approaches to Iran*

### *(4.1) Strategic differences*

While Israeli probably sees the UAE's geographical proximity to Iran as an incentive to seek deeper military cooperation with the Emiratis, the leadership in Abu Dhabi seem to consider the same proximity as a reason to refrain from further military partnering with Israel. From Israel's perspective, having access to UAE-based facilities would shorten the distance between Israel and Iran, minimise the need for over-stretched aerial refuelling supply lines and therefore reduce the risks associated with long flights in a hostile air space. From the UAE's point of view, however, allowing Israel to launch strikes on Iran from Emirati soil would expose the country to potential retaliatory attacks by Iran or its proxies. Amid the current intensification of Israeli-attributed sabotage activities targeting Iranian military targets, the Iranian Foreign Ministry spokesman Saeed Khatibzadeh has made it clear that Tehran does not intend to seek retaliation for these

attacks against third countries, although this might change if Tel Aviv's strikes on Iran originate from Israeli military hardware based in the UAE.

Although the UAE has become a more assertive player in the region and significantly bolstered its combat military capabilities during the past decade, it is reluctant to be dragged into an all-out conflict or a localised armed confrontation, especially after the country's gradual disengagement and tactical repositioning in the Yemeni conflict since 2019. The country has revised its foreign policy to reflect its long-term national strategic interests and refocused its financial and political resources on promoting a secure, prosperous environment at home and in the region. Its approach is now one of de-escalation, as exemplified by its recent diplomatic overtures to Iran. While other GCC countries -Egypt, Iraq, Jordan and Israel- have made combative statements regarding Iran during talks about a US-led air and missile defence alliance, the UAE stayed mum and publicly announced its intention of reinstating its ambassador to Iran.

On the contrary, the political and military leadership in Israel has repeatedly signalled that it wants to maintain an aggressive containment policy aimed at eliminating Iran's ability to acquire a nuclear weapon by any means necessary, including the use of force. Since many of Israel's security initiatives are geared towards halting Iran's nuclear ambitions, Gawdat Bahgat, a professor at the National Defence University, and Abdolrasool Divsallar, a non-resident scholar at the Middle East Institute, have pointed out that 'Israeli officials may view these regional defence collaborations as one of the phases of their preparation to strike Iran'.

Increased military cooperation with Israel against Iran would expose the UAE to an array of risks, and although UAE-Israeli cooperation on state-of-the-art weaponry systems and technologies is gradually gaining traction, Tel Aviv seems reluctant to share the technical know-how of its unchallenged Iron Dome air-defence system. While the UAE-Israel balancing act vis-à-vis Iran is expected to deliver some meaningful outcomes in the security and technology domains, the prospects for a more comprehensive strategic engagement between the two countries are unlikely given the current geopolitical context.

#### *(4.2) Iranian nuclear deal*

An Iran at the threshold of gaining a nuclear weapon is a major cause of concern for both the UAE and Israel. Iran has increased its stockpile of highly enriched uranium and the number of its advanced centrifuges, and while it must still go through the time-consuming and complex process of weaponising and deploying fissile material on a missile, Tehran seems to have significantly shortened its 'breakout' timeline for building an atomic bomb. There is a growing unease between International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) officials and the Iranian authorities over the monitoring of enrichment levels at Iranian nuclear sites, and the prospect of a nuclear-armed Iran has become an uncomfortable reality for the UAE and Israel.

Yet the countries have voiced their concerns about the situation differently. Israel has made no effort to conceal its scepticism about attempts at the Vienna talks to resuscitate the Iranian nuclear deal and have openly considered the military option to halt Iran's

nuclear enrichment programme. The UAE does not appear to oppose a JCPOA 2.0 revival by default, but is more inclined to demand better security guarantees from its Western partners, primarily the US, and reassurances from Tehran that Iran will not rush to get a nuclear bomb. In this regard, the UAE and Iran have recently signalled that they can interact constructively on the nuclear file. In mid-July 2022, for instance, the Iranian Foreign Minister, Hossein Amirabdollahian, reached out to his Emirati counterpart, Sheikh Abdullah bin Zayed al Nahyan, after the UAE expressed its concern to the IAEA over Iran's weapon-grade uranium enrichment activities. This positive engagement demonstrates that the two countries have enough political will to keep a direct communication line open that could help them avoid miscalculations and manage crises.

#### *(4.3) Economic boycott of Iran*

As a financial hub strategically positioned on the East-West trade routes and with ever-expanding growth ambitions, the UAE is committed to boosting its economic diversification push with a market-friendly posture aimed at easing conditions to do business in and with the country. It would therefore like to avoid the imposition of unilateral sanctions and formulas that could slow down its own economic growth. Iran is a long-time trade partner and an attractive market for Emirati investments. Endowed with strong logistics, world-wide commercial networks and solid financial institutions, the UAE is eager to capitalise on the lifting of sanctions against Iran and the country's readmission to the global economy by positioning itself as a re-export hub for Iranian products to overseas markets. With President Ibrahim Raisi's government in desperate need of cash, inflation nearing threatening highs and subsidies curbed even on basic staples, the future does not seem to bode well for Iran's growth ambitions. The UAE eyes its neighbour's economic woes as a golden opportunity to secure profitable financial investment deals and signal its goodwill towards Tehran. The two countries, mainly thanks to the role of the Iranian community living in Dubai, have maintained good economic relations throughout the decades and kept business flowing even in times of diplomatic strife. More recently, the UAE helped Iran to better endure US sanctions by acting as an intermediary for Iranian oil sales to China and by restocking Iran's consumer market. It is unlikely for the UAE to renounce its traditional trade ties and promising investment opportunities in a cash-strapped Iran.

Israel, on the other hand, has been one of the staunchest supporters of economic pressure on Iran, arguing that the lifting of sanctions would embolden Tehran by providing it with capital to finance its network of regional proxies, which would stoke instability in the Middle East. Israel has championed the use of economic pressure as a tool to induce the Iranian regime to collapse under the weight of severe economic hardship.

#### *(5) A challenge for the new Emir: gaining popular approval*

When Sheikh Khalifa bin Zayed died in May 2022, Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed assumed his elder brother's title of Emir of Abu Dhabi and was appointed in May 2022 President of the UAE by the Supreme Council, the institutional body gathering the rulers of the seven Emirates. Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed has been the country's de-facto leader since 2014, when he informally took over from Sheikh Khalifa, who restricted his public appearances and reduced his active involvement in government affairs due to



severe health problems. Those years served as an apprenticeship of sorts for Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed, giving him opportunities to sharpen his statecraft, bolster his leadership credentials in the eyes of the other Emirates rulers and consolidate his popularity among the Emirati public in preparation for his ascent to the UAE's most prominent institutional office. Aware of the uncertainty looming over the future of the country's oil-based economy, Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed proved to be a ruler with foresight, supporting major socio-economic reforms and pioneering mega-projects aimed at ensuring his people's long-term prosperity.

By outlining his ambitious vision with such projects as the UAE Energy Strategy 2050, the UAE Centennial 2071 and the Projects of the 50, and mobilising unprecedented resources, Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed wanted to promote the country as a global, open and dynamic economic hub in a world order built on multi-faceted networks. The Abraham Accords and the fence-mending diplomacy with Turkey and Iran are long-term attempts on the road to regional stability. They are an integral part of the UAE's endeavour to build a stable, war-free environment in the Middle East, where the unabated flow of seaborne trade and the flourishing of business ties dovetail with the country's long-lasting socio-economic success.

Although almost two years have passed since signing the Abraham Accords in Washington DC, the Emirati people have not fully embraced the partnership, which is seen by some as a top-down endeavour supported primarily by the elite and circles close to the political establishment. The Washington Institute for Near East Policy points out that in its public opinion polls between November 2020 and March 2022 the segment of people who held a somewhat optimistic attitude towards the Abraham Accords fell from 47% to 25%, while those who perceived UAE-Israel normalisation in a negative light rose from 49% to 71%.

Some of this erosion of public support can be attributed to a lack of expected results from the normalisation deal, and there is a generational difference in how Israel is perceived in the UAE, with younger segments of the Emirati population expressing a more favourable view of Israel, while the older generation is more sceptical and apprehensive. Another factor that needs further analysis is the significant mobilisation and active engagement on social media platforms in the aftermath of symbolic events, such as the repeated storming of the Al Aqsa Mosque by Israeli security forces during the holy month of Ramadan and the killing of the Al-Jazeera journalist Shireen Abu Akleh last May. The Palestinian cause still resonates among the Emirati public regardless of age, and manifestations of solidarity with the plight of the Palestinians have remained a recurrent pattern. In the UAE, political sentiment rarely takes the form of public demonstrations or direct criticism of the regime; voicing opposition to government policies is a delicate matter, and it is primarily discussed privately with family members and close friends. For the most part, the UAE population is compliant with the government's positions, although social media platforms and online forums remain vital alternatives for signalling discontent about specific issues without necessarily questioning the individual's allegiance to the regime. Although the country is a semi-constitutional monarchy, the leadership values a public consensus and monitoring online expressions of discomfort is critical to securing a sufficient legitimacy from below for the government.

Although the leadership's push is a powerful driver, the citizens' consensus remains vital to turning the UAE-Israel deal from ink on paper into a meaningful partnership capable of delivering tangible outcomes. Should elite-to-elite relations remain circumscribed to transactional exchanges and person-to-person interactions minimal, the Abraham Accords are likely to lose their initial transformative potential and bring about only cosmetic changes to the regional political makeup. On the contrary, if the Emirati and Israeli leaderships are able to successfully mobilise their political, financial and diplomatic potential, the two countries are likely to make major strides. Generating greater returns on the Abrahamic entente requires deft manoeuvring by both leaderships and a conducive regional environment.

## Conclusions

The Abraham Accords, as well as all other initiatives inaugurated by the UAE in the foreign policy domain, are meant to serve the country's vital interests: safeguarding national security and fostering economic prosperity. By regrouping with historically close and new partners, on the one hand, and by keeping a communication channel open with Iran, on the other, the UAE has signalled that it has both the political will and the diplomatic flexibility necessary to give substance to its grand strategy, which aims at making the UAE a regional, independent power player and a global economic champion under the leadership of Emir Mohammed bin Zayed.