



BUSSOLA INSTITUTE WEBINAR REPORT

THE ABRAHAM ACCORDS: A WAY FORWARD FOR PEACE AND WELLBEING?



16 MARCH 2021

On 16 March 2021, the Bussola Institute hosted a webinar addressing the potential of the Abraham Accords as a framework for the development of a more sustainable peace in the Middle East region. The webinar also analysed the possibilities of cooperation between the EU and the GCC in supporting peace, building greater economic prosperity and social development.

On 15 September 2020, Israel and two Gulf states, the UAE and Bahrain, signed the “Abraham Accords”, a joint statement directed at the normalisation of relations between the signatories. Two further states, Morocco and Sudan, have also entered into normalisation agreements with Israel. The Abraham Accords marked a major development in the pursuit of meaningful engagement across the region. By strengthening communication and cooperation between the various states in the region, the threats to peace can be addressed in a more constructive manner. The Accords provide a potential framework for economic cooperation, supporting innovations in technology, facilitating growth in tourism, increasing business-to-business relations and advancing greater interaction between societies. In just under six months since the signing of the Accords, the Gulf region and Israel have significantly advanced practical cooperation in several areas. Embassies have been established, ambassadors have been appointed and there is increasing activity between businesses and individuals. This webinar brought together a panel of experts to analyse the potential areas of cooperation between the EU and the GCC following the Abraham Accords.



THE EXPERT SPEAKERS FOR THE WEBINAR WERE:



Antonio López-Istúriz White MEP

Chair of the European Parliament Delegation for Relations with Israel, President of the EU-UAE Parliamentary Friendship Group.



Ambassador Aharon Leshno-Yaar

Head of the Mission of Israel to the EU and NATO.



Abdullah Al-Junaid

Bahraini political analyst and commentator.



David Bruck

Middle East Peace Process Division, European External Action Service.



Mr. John Dennehy

Secretary General, Bussola Institute.

The webinar was moderated by Mr. John Dennehy, Secretary-General of the Bussola Institute.

On 15 September 2020, a general declaration of principles, termed “The Abraham Accords”, was signed by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu of Israel, the foreign ministers of the United Arab Emirates (UAE), HE Abdullah bin Zayed Al Nahyan and Bahrain, HE Abdullatif Al Zayani, and former US President Donald J. Trump. The Accords declaration represents a normalisation of relations between Israel and the two Gulf states for the purpose of realising a shared vision of peace, security, and prosperity in the Middle East.

The Abraham Accords declaration was followed by a joint communique from Israel and the UAE welcoming the bold vision embodied in the Accords and Israel’s agreement to suspend further extension of sovereignty in line with the former US President’s “Vision for Peace” document. A formal treaty between Israel and the UAE has been signed setting out their agreement to chart a new path for the Middle East to realise its full potential as a stable, peaceful and prosperous region. Bahrain and Israel signed a further political declaration of intent for supporting the Accords and promoting security connections. Following on from the further agreements, embassies have been opened and greater cooperation is being pursued. Morocco and Sudan have also followed with pronouncements of support for the Abraham Accords declaration and pursuing normalisation with Israel.

Prior to the Abraham Accords, two states in the Middle East formally recognised relations with Israel – Jordan and Egypt. Israel’s relations with Egypt and Jordan have been peaceful but have led to only limited normalisation. It has been no secret that many of the Gulf states were engaging with Israel in different ways. The UAE and Israel have been participants in joint military training with the US, Israel has a representative to the International Renewable Energy Agency based in Abu Dhabi, and various Israeli ministers have visited the UAE and Oman to attend events.

The Accords mark a new step in the pursuit of Middle East peace in an innovative way. By invoking the spirit of Abraham as a common point of heritage amongst the societies, the Accords remove politics and security as the starting point for cooperation. Typically, any discussion of Middle East peace hinges on resolving the situation of Palestine through military or political means, with the political often being highly confrontational based on “all or nothing” options. The Accords seek to “desecuritize” the matter and instead the focus is on socio-cultural-religious bonds as a starting point in support of developing people-to-people links. Concerns over and attention to the security issues are not removed as Israel is expected to halt the extension of settlements as a major step in seeking to resolve the ongoing conflict. It is necessary to find ways to build trust between the Palestinians and Israel and the Accords can be a foundation for further action in this regard. The Accords seek to place the matter in a wider frame with action directed in a more holistic way to address other security matters such as water, climate, and food security. These issues have a direct impact on the lived experiences of everyone, making them a significant area for action.

It is clear the Abraham Accords represent a major development for the Middle East region, provided that concrete measures follow that lead to peace. The Accords demonstrate how views and approaches to sustainable peace in the region are changing and that a new approach is necessary. The Accords have opened up and will continue to support new opportunities for bringing about lasting peace to the region that benefits everyone. The people-to-people approach of the Accords widens the discussion about sustainable peace in the Middle East region. Encouraging more exchanges between individuals and groups in the societies supporting the Accords works to ensure that the challenges to peace and security are viewed in a new way that will seek to achieve resolution and not the retrenchment of divisive positions. A key step to resolving tensions and opposing views is the building of trust and understanding, an important result that will flow from the increase in people-to-people contacts.



The people-to-people dimension of the Accords is the starting point for more expansive activity, in particular in relation to economic relations. The economic dimensions extend from the people-to-people contacts up through to the private businesses engaging and involves government to government agreements to facilitate and support greater interconnectedness in trade and investment. As the European project has demonstrated, it is possible for states and societies whose relations were long defined by war and conflict to come together in mutually beneficial ways.

The economic links already have a dynamic element to the new relations. Extensive cooperation is being discussed concerning technology developments and innovations to common objectives. Measures are supported by the start-up culture that is thriving in Israel and taking hold in the Gulf states. In particular, this will provide opportunities for individuals, especially young people, to pursue skills and knowledge through multiple cross-border channels in the region. The result of bringing people together in the pursuit of start-ups and other innovations in economic activity demonstrates the social and cultural value of peaceful interactions as well as contributing to overall economic development.

The economic developments resulting from the Accords will have a wide-ranging impact on the region. Economic diversification is a major objective for Gulf economies and the opportunity for Israel to expand its economic activity to new markets will provide an economic boost. The impact of increased tourism between the parties to the Accords has already expanded economic activity, supporting local markets during the COVID-19 pandemic. Increased economic cooperation will also support global trade, as initiatives to expand supply chains and energy supplies contribute to global economic development.

The economic dimensions, particularly in relation to technology and innovation, will also support the holistic approach to security. Initiatives directed at expanding cooperation to address food and water security are high on the list of priorities. For the Gulf states and Israel, these are matters of great concern and cooperation should bring about advances for furthering security. The same applies to the potential for technological advances in renewable energy and issues related to the climate change agenda, which are beneficial for the region and the wider global situation. It is also clear that normalisation contributes to military security as the Accord participants face common challenges in the region related to armed non-state actors and terrorism.

The opportunities presented by the Abraham Accords are not exclusive to the signatories of the agreements. There is plenty of space for others to utilise these opportunities in support of sustainable peace in the region. For the EU, the new lines of communication that have opened through normalisation, combined with the economic opportunities that will result, provide substantial space for further engagement. As the issue of Palestine is very much part of the EU's Southern Neighbourhood strategy and foreign policy, developments such as the Abraham Accords will contribute to the EU's efforts to bring about peace in the region. The Accords present the EU with another dimension for furthering discussion on key security issues facing the region. The importance of the Accords in supporting the EU's efforts in the region also comes in the trust-building that the Accords will bring about, allowing for more constructive discussions, leading to tangible outcomes that are mutually beneficial for all.

The positive contributions made by the Abraham Accords to sustainable peace in the Middle East are not inevitable and continued efforts to build upon this start will be necessary. Greater interaction amongst various parties in the region will open up lines of communication so that the issues of the region can be discussed in a more constructive fashion. From the current engagement with the Accords and celebrations surrounding the positive benefits it brings, things will not always be easy going forward. There are differences in cultural approaches and attitudes

that may create tensions or cause dissatisfaction. This should be seen as part of the normal processes for diplomacy and engagement. It is important for all those concerned with peace in the region that action is taken on real and tangible measures supportive of the desire for peace in the Middle East.

The positive benefits of the Accords have been recognised widely since the signing in September 2020. Reaching the point where Israel and a number of GCC states were sharing a common stage signing an agreement to work together was a significant achievement. The next step is to pursue concrete ways to build trust for long-lasting peace with all of Israel's neighbours, which includes the Palestinians.

Key areas identified for realising the significance of the Accords include:

- encouraging economic cooperation at the people-to-people level through economic incentive programmes;
- embracing cultural differences through exchange programmes;
- expanding interfaith projects across the regions;
- diversifying technological cooperation on issues of mutual interest.





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