

A Stronger and Wider Peace: A U.S. Strategy for Advancing the Abraham Accords

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I. Introduction

The normalization agreements that the United States brokered between Israel and four Arab states – the United Arab Emirates (the UAE), Bahrain, Morocco, and Sudan – represent a major inflection point in the history of the modern Middle East. Struck in rapid succession over the final months of 2020, the Abraham Accords have the potential to shift the region’s strategic trajectory in ways overwhelmingly favorable to U.S. national security. These agreements hold out the prospect of ending the persistent conflict between Israel and a group of pragmatic Arab states, which since the early days of the Cold War has regularly frustrated Washington’s ability to establish an effective multinational framework for safeguarding vital U.S. interests in the Middle East.

Realizing their full potential will entail continued and concerted American leadership, both to help deepen ties among the members of the Accords, especially in the defense sphere, and to expand the agreements to include other pivotal regional actors – in particular Saudi Arabia. The Jewish Institute for National Security of America (JINSA) convened the Abraham Accords Policy Project and this task force – comprised of leading retired senior American military officers and national security officials with deep Middle East experience – to understand and articulate how U.S. policies can capitalize on these historic developments to encourage further progress that will strengthen regional stability, boost America’s waning global influence, and ultimately leave it better positioned to compete against the growing strategic challenges posed by China, Russia, and Iran. As part of their research and deliberations, members of the task force conducted an extensive, high-level fact-finding mission to Bahrain, Israel, and the UAE in the fall of 2021, with a special focus on examining new possibilities created by the Accords for building defense cooperation and military-to-military ties.

This comprehensive report is intended to provide in-depth analysis and recommendations to help inform the work of American decision makers, both in the Biden administration and Congress, as well as the broader policymaking community and public. Its first section identifies the factors, both long-term and proximate, that made the Accords possible, and details some of the remarkable and unprecedented cooperation they have already spurred in the realms of diplomacy, trade, culture, and even defense. The second section contains the group’s key findings, anchored around the vital importance of sustained U.S. leadership and support for consolidating and widening the Accords, including taking full advantage of the multinational framework provided by U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM) and Israel’s recent integration into its area of operations. In laying out a menu of policy prescriptions that range from less controversial low-hanging fruit to more ambitious, complex, and even transformative initiatives, the third and final section of the report emphasizes how the Executive Branch and Congress should maintain attitudes of flexibility and opportunism to seize upon the many strategic breakthroughs made possible by these landmark agreements.

II. Executive Summary

A. Strategic Context

From July 2020 to January 2021, the United States helped Israel finalize historic agreements to normalize relations with four Arab countries: the UAE, Bahrain, Morocco, and Sudan. Known as the Abraham Accords, these landmark deals already are enabling unprecedented trade, cultural exchanges, and even security cooperation between several of these states and Israel. At a time of profound concern over America's commitment to the Middle East, especially in the wake of the withdrawal from Afghanistan, U.S. leadership to strengthen and expand the Accords can both advance U.S. interests in the region and shore up Washington's waning global prestige and influence. By increasing the capacity of America's most capable Middle East partners to work together in shouldering more of the burdens of upholding regional stability and security, the Accords also provide the United States with a way to balance its need to continue safeguarding its vital interests in the Middle East with the growing imperatives of strategic competition with China and Russia.

While Israel long maintained quiet contacts with many of its Arab neighbors, those relations deepened over the past decade. Three shared threats in particular pushed them closer together: the turmoil of the Arab Spring, Iran's rising power, and America's growing retrenchment from the Middle East. In seeking to manage this increasingly dangerous set of challenges, a number of U.S.-aligned Arab states, not surprisingly, sought to strengthen and solidify their ties with Israel – the region's preeminent military, economic, and technological power.

The primary obstacle historically deterring these Arab states from normalizing their relations with Israel was the Palestinian conflict. All of the former were party to the 2002 Arab Peace Initiative that conditioned normalization on the establishment of a Palestinian state. But many, like the UAE, increasingly chafed at the fact that the pursuit of their national interests with Israel was subject to the veto of a Palestinian leadership that they viewed as increasingly corrupt, incompetent, and incapable of making peace.

When the opportunity unexpectedly emerged in summer 2020 to stop Israel from extending sovereignty over portions of the West Bank in exchange for normalization, UAE Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed seized it. In a diplomatic masterstroke, the UAE could credibly claim it had preserved the prospects for a two-state solution, while at the same time finally de-linking its relationship with Israel from the Palestinian question. Once the logjam was broken by the UAE deal, Bahrain, Sudan, and Morocco had sufficient cover to quickly follow suit, and without reference to the Palestinian conflict.

Paradoxically, while concerns about America's receding commitment to the Middle East pushed the Arab states toward Israel, U.S. leadership and support proved essential for

finally bringing those relations into the open. Absent a massive diplomatic effort by the Trump administration, the Abraham Accords simply would not have happened. After the UAE offer of trading annexation for normalization, it took weeks of intensive U.S. mediation to broker the final deal. Once done, the administration then made expanding the Accords to more states its highest foreign policy priority for the final months of President Trump's term – an extraordinary diplomatic effort that paid off with three additional deals in rapid succession.

Crucial to the administration's success was its readiness to provide the Accords' Arab participants with significant – and in some cases controversial – inducements in terms of their bilateral relations with the United States. This included arms sales to the UAE, recognition of Morocco's sovereignty over Western Sahara, and removal of Sudan from the State Department's list of state sponsors of terrorism. Also critical to the administration's diplomacy was its hardline posture toward Iran, especially the stunning killing just months earlier of Iran's most important military leader, General Qassem Soleimani, which provided vulnerable states like the UAE and Bahrain greater confidence that the United States would have their back should normalization trigger an Iranian backlash.

Though internal political turmoil has stalled Sudan's progress on normalization, the extraordinary headway in Israel's relations with the UAE, Bahrain, and Morocco in little more than a year is testament to the enormous potential inherent in the "warm peace" that these nations are committed to forging. Importantly, once completed with U.S. assistance, the Accords empowered these states in many instances to make major progress on their own in terms of building cooperation between not just governments, but peoples. While unprecedented advancements in diplomacy, economics, culture, and other civilian sectors have rightly dominated the headlines, recent months have also witnessed accelerating efforts to begin developing defense cooperation and military-to-military ties as well.

B. Findings

The initial successes of the Accords, and the breakthroughs needed to bring them about, offer several overarching lessons for American decision makers in terms of consolidating and expanding these historic agreements going forward.

Most straightforwardly, the United States has a fundamental interest in strengthening the Accords and helping ensure they achieve their full political, economic, and security potential. Just as the 1979 peace treaty between Egypt and Israel shaped the Middle East's strategic landscape of the past 40 years in ways overwhelmingly favorable to U.S. interests, the Accords have opened a new era of Arab-Israeli cooperation that could prove no less beneficial to U.S. interests for the next 40 years. By triggering a major realignment in Arab-Israeli relations, the Accords have created an historic opportunity to bring America's most important Middle East partners together for the first time in a coalition to bolster regional stability, security, and prosperity for decades to come.

Seizing that opportunity will require sustained and bipartisan U.S. leadership, commitment, and support. As surely as the breakthrough of the Accords would not have happened without the United States playing a central role, so, too, achieving their full strategic potential will depend heavily on continued and reliable American engagement – especially when it comes to defense and security cooperation.

The Biden administration was slow to fully embrace the Accords. During its first seven months in office, it advanced no concrete policies to deepen or widen the peace process, even as Israel and its Arab partners pushed ahead on the diplomatic, economic, and cultural potentials of their newfound warm peace. Instead, the administration focused its energies on a different set of regional priorities, including withdrawing from Afghanistan, resurrecting the Iran nuclear deal, and ending the war in Yemen. But as those efforts encountered difficulties, important signs emerged of the Biden team’s growing appreciation for the value of the Accords and its readiness to start playing a more active role in advancing them, including in key diplomatic engagements with important Arab and Muslim-majority countries like Saudi Arabia and Indonesia.

As most observers acknowledge, Saudi Arabia is the big prize. As an enormously influential Muslim state, bringing it into the Accords would be a game changer that could transform the geopolitics of the Middle East, and fundamentally alter the nature of Israel’s seven-decade long conflict with the Arab and Muslim worlds. But while the kingdom’s de facto ruler, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MBS), has been supportive of the Accords generally, serious obstacles still exist to making Saudi-Israeli normalization a reality – both inside the kingdom itself, as well as in the Biden administration’s strained relationship with MBS due to the brutal 2018 murder of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi.

In terms of advancing the security potential of the Accords, President Trump’s decision in January 2021 to reassign Israel to CENTCOM’s area of operations – a move which JINSA had pressed for years – was extremely important. Proceeding under CENTCOM’s multinational rubric, tremendous opportunities now exist for the United States to integrate Israel into its network of Middle East partnerships, foster Israel’s burgeoning military-to-military ties with Arab countries, and begin developing a new regional security framework grounded in the reality of increasing Arab-Israeli cooperation. CENTCOM’s organization last November of the first-ever combined naval exercise involving Israel, the UAE, and Bahrain is just one example of the important opportunities that the Accords are creating to shape the region’s security environment in ways advantageous to U.S. interests.

C. Recommendations

Recent signs that the Biden administration has increased its efforts to support the Accords should be welcomed. To inject new momentum into the process, the administration, in conjunction with Congress, needs to develop a concerted strategy with

buy-in from both political parties aimed at strengthening, expanding, and underscoring sustained U.S. support for the Accords.

Send Clear Signals of U.S. Support for Advancing the Accords

Appointing a special U.S. envoy for normalization would send an unmistakable signal that, whatever its initial reluctance, the administration now considers the effort to consolidate and widen the circle of Arab-Israeli peace one of its top priorities. Likewise, President Biden should consider convening a summit that brings together leaders from Israel and its new Arab peace partners, as well as Egypt and Jordan, to launch an ongoing diplomatic forum for discussing and developing initiatives to deepen defense cooperation among its members and other like-minded states to strengthen Middle East security.

Congress, for its part, should consider legislation along the lines of an Abraham Accords Defense Cooperation Act to promote joint efforts in key areas of importance to the United States. This should include developing integrated regional air defenses, particularly to counter the growing shared threat from Iranian missiles and unmanned aerial systems (UAS). Congress also should work to ensure the United States is well positioned to benefit from the enormous potential that exists in the union of Israeli defense-technology ingenuity with Arab financial power – perhaps through the establishment of an Abraham Accords Defense Technology Foundation that would help catalyze combined efforts to develop key military technologies.

Be Flexible, But Ambitious, in Developing Defense Cooperation

The administration's strategy for building defense cooperation should aim high while remaining attuned to the sensitivities of its Arab partners, particularly those in the Gulf most vulnerable to Iranian threats. It should develop a menu of options ranging from areas that are relatively low risk and uncontroversial to those that are more complex and likely to generate unwanted blowback from regional adversaries.

Assigning an Israeli liaison officer to U.S. Naval Forces Central Command (NAVCENT) headquarters in Bahrain should be relatively easy. Greater CENTCOM-led maritime domain awareness efforts, as well as combined exercises involving Israel in land, air, naval, space, and cyber domains, are obvious areas where steady growth should occur. NAVCENT already oversees several multinational task forces that perform a variety of specific maritime security missions across its area of operations from the Persian Gulf and Strait of Hormuz around to the Arabian Sea, Bab-el-Mandeb, and the Red Sea. Israel should be steadily integrated into as many of these efforts as possible – from counter-narcotics trafficking operations to participation in NAVCENT's recently formed Task Force 59 focused on detecting and deterring Iranian malign activities at sea through the deployment of drones, in which Israel is a world leader.

Israel's unique operational experience and capabilities also make the area of missile defense and counter-UAS an obvious one for expanding defense cooperation with its Arab neighbors. Virtually all the region's states (including those not yet part of the Accords) that find themselves under threat from the rocket and drone forces of Iran and its proxies are eager to access Israeli technology. For its part, Israel also could gain significantly from a common air operating picture and a regional early warning system that extends its aerial intelligence picture to Iran's borders. As the main strategic partner of both Israel and key Arab states, Washington is well-positioned to organize such a regionwide effort and develop practical solutions to the obstacles involved in making it a reality.

Develop U.S. Strategy for Israel-Saudi Normalization

No country has perhaps greater immediate need for Israeli air defense technology than Saudi Arabia. Its citizens have been targeted by more drones, courtesy of Iran and its Houthi proxy in Yemen, than any other country in history. U.S. leadership in bringing Israeli systems to the kingdom to ameliorate this acute security threat would represent a major step forward in the Saudi-Israeli relationship.

As for the broader issue of normalization between Saudi Arabia and Israel, the administration should develop a strategy, including addressing the kingdom's air defense vulnerabilities, for trying to bring the kingdom into the Accords over time. Much depends on MBS and his domestic calculations of what is possible with Israel. But much also depends on MBS's level of confidence in his own relationship with the United States and the kinds of American support he could expect should he decide to move forward – including in containing Iranian aggression, Saudi Arabia's primary security threat. This is all the more important in light of recent reports that Riyadh is working with Beijing to develop ballistic missiles, and the signal it sends more generally about Riyadh's willingness to pursue alternative strategic partnerships if relations with Washington continue to fray.

The administration should work to determine what risks MBS is prepared to take for peace and what he needs from the United States to proceed. Appointing a U.S. ambassador to the kingdom who has President Biden's personal trust and can speak authoritatively on his behalf with the crown prince is an obvious first step.

Of course, should MBS prove ready to make progress, the administration could be faced with some difficult decisions. On the one hand, among President Biden's Democratic Party base, any effort to bring MBS in from the cold after the Khashoggi murder, no matter what the reason, will be considered heresy. The domestic political blowback could be fierce. On the other hand, the strategic payoffs to U.S. national interests would be consequential and far-reaching, a truly historic achievement of American diplomacy that would fundamentally change the Middle East for the better, while also dramatically enhancing President Biden's own legacy and stature as an international statesman.

III. Strategic Context

A. U.S. Struggles to Build Regional Order

For the better part of seven decades following World War II, the United States has aspired to build a functional Middle East security architecture among its closest partners that could protect American interests while limiting the burdens shouldered by the U.S. military – without any real lasting success to show for its efforts. Beginning in the 1950s, Washington’s attempts to foster effective regionwide political and military cooperation foundered repeatedly in the face of two counterforces: hostility between many of America’s Arab partners and Israel, often centered around the Palestinian conflict, as well as concerted efforts to stymie progress toward U.S.-led regional integration by adversaries like the Soviet Union, Nasserite Egypt, rejectionist Arab states subsequently seeking Nasser’s pan-Arab mantle, and, more recently, the Islamic Republic of Iran and radical Sunni Islamist groups.

From its formation in 1955, the Middle Eastern analogue to NATO, known as the “Baghdad Pact” (and beginning in 1958, as the Central Treaty Organization or CENTO), suffered from a lack of U.S. participation in the organization, including the notable absence of any Article V-type U.S. security guarantee for the alliance.¹ The alliance also was riven by serious tensions between members like Turkey, Iraq, and Iran, as well as the non-involvement of other budding U.S. partners such as Israel and Saudi Arabia, and outright hostility from the most powerful Arab state, namely Soviet-backed Egypt. Indeed, Cairo’s determined opposition helped overthrow the pro-Western Iraqi monarchy and push the country out of the alliance just three short years after the pact’s inauguration.²

Even Israel’s landmark 1979 and 1994 peace treaties with Egypt and Jordan, respectively, did little to foster the emergence of a new U.S.-led multinational security order based on expanded defense cooperation between Israel and its Arab peace partners – despite all three being closely aligned with the United States, and despite American bilateral military assistance being crucial to pushing both treaties across the finish line.³ In ending Cairo’s and Amman’s states of war with Israel that dated back to the latter’s founding, these treaties tended to be far more focused on resolving past disputes between governments than building a future vision of peace.

As a result, both of these first-generation agreements ended up being restricted to a state of “cold peace” that was largely confined to formal diplomatic recognition, mutual non-aggression, and limited *sub rosa* security and intelligence coordination. For decades following their signing ceremonies, neither agreement fostered favorable conditions for more open and expansive economic, social, and defense cooperation. The Egyptian and Jordanian governments did little to encourage their citizens to engage with Israel or educate them on the advantages of peace. Instead, too often they

stoked or courted anti-Israel public sentiment when politically expedient, particularly around the unresolved Palestinian conflict.

B. Shared Threats Drive Closer Relations and “Warm Peace”

By contrast, the Abraham Accords that the United States brokered in 2020 between Israel and four Arab states – the UAE, Bahrain, Morocco, and Sudan – have created a significant new strategic opening for Washington to bring several of its most important Middle East partners together for the first time in a common effort to bolster regional stability, security, and prosperity. This opportunity flows in no small part from the commitment that several of these states have made to build a “warm peace” that extends beyond formal relations between governments to include wide-ranging economic, social, and cultural ties between their publics as well. Their vision is an expansive and positive one based on mutual interests between states lacking the historical animosities toward Israel that have prevailed in much of the rest of the Middle East.⁴

Unlike the case with Israel’s immediate neighbors, including Egypt and Jordan, no state of war ever existed between Israel and the UAE, Bahrain, and Morocco, and anti-Israel incitement historically was far less common in these countries compared to other parts of the Arab world. As a result, informal ties have quietly been developing between them and Israel for years, including on security, intelligence, trade, cultural, and diplomatic matters. Rather than fixating on historical grievances, these states have long been more focused on working with Israel to enhance their national prosperity and security in the face of mounting regional challenges.⁵

Several longer-term trends over the past decade-plus combined to serve as the fundamental driver of these nascent relationships. Most importantly, a series of common threats emerged that pushed several Arab states to seek out Israel’s military strength, intelligence capabilities, and diplomatic sway with the United States to help manage the growing risks that they faced.

The first was the Arab Spring of 2011, which triggered a wave of instability and violence across the region, toppling several longstanding Arab regimes, threatening others, and super-charging the prospects of radical Islamist movements in many countries, including the Muslim Brotherhood and, eventually, the Islamic State. Both Israel and moderate Arab monarchies like the UAE and Saudi Arabia viewed the collapse of President Mubarak’s rule in Egypt, and replacement by a Muslim Brotherhood government, as particularly ominous and threatening.⁶

An even greater shared concern for these states has been Iran’s dramatically expanding regional power and hegemonic ambitions. Iran is widely believed to have an active and increasingly advanced nuclear weapons program, in addition to the largest ballistic missile arsenal in the Middle East and a sophisticated offensive drone program.⁷ Especially in recent years, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) has built a

large and effective network of regional proxy armies and terrorist groups to coerce, subvert, and sow violence against Israel, U.S. assets in the Middle East, and partner Arab states. Indeed, leaders in Israel and the Gulf states have offered remarkably similar assessments about the nature and urgency of the Iranian threat.

America's steadily declining will to guarantee Middle East security and stability is the third geopolitical trend helping drive Israel and the Gulf states together. Just as the twin crises of the Arab Spring and Iran's rising hegemony were accelerating, Washington's commitment to defending the region's U.S.-led order appeared to be receding – a casualty of mounting U.S. fatigue with long, costly, and inconclusive wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Both President Obama and President Trump openly campaigned on their desire to reduce America's role and commitments in the region, especially militarily. A series of discrete decisions were widely interpreted by Washington's traditional partners as an emerging pattern of retrenchment, retreat, and even abandonment. Early milestones included the refusal to stand by America's longtime ally Mubarak, "leading from behind" in Libya, withdrawing from Iraq in 2011, and the failure to uphold a chemical weapons redline in Syria in 2013.

The 2015 Iran nuclear deal, known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), and President Obama's injunction the following year that the rest of the Middle East should learn to "share the neighborhood" with Tehran, dramatically accelerated this process of ever-closer alignment between Israel and key Arab states.⁸ Underwritten by extensive sanctions relief and a seeming lack of American pushback, Iran's regional influence grew alarmingly in the wake of the JCPOA as it ramped up defense spending and deepened its support for proxy militias in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Gaza, and Yemen.⁹ Washington's reluctance to use its military power to counter Iran's growing regional footprint further incentivized Israel and the Gulf states to try and fill the ensuing diplomatic and strategic vacuum by increasing ties with each other.

For moderate Arab states like the UAE, Bahrain, and Morocco, ties with Israel – the region's strongest military power – also offered opportunities for much-needed advancements in their own defense capabilities and industries, as well as enhanced trade and investment ties with a cutting-edge economic and technological powerhouse – one which, unlike the United States, was not going anywhere and which was more than ready to act forcefully against Iran. For Israel, a small country that saw it itself being steadily surrounded by a "ring of fire" in the form of Iranian militias and missiles, expanding relationships in the Arab world could provide valuable strategic depth while also inverting the region's geography – in which Tehran has been pushing its forces ever closer to Israel's borders – by giving Israel new strategic partners on Iran's doorstep along the Persian Gulf.¹⁰ For a country isolated since birth from the rest of the region and facing growing international efforts to delegitimize its rights to self-defense and even simply to exist, normalization also held out for Israel the prospect of greater trade, cultural exchanges, and ultimately international legitimacy.

C. Overcoming the Palestinian Hurdle

Yet despite these major geopolitical shifts in the Middle East, the Palestinian issue still served as the key roadblock inhibiting these Arab states from moving their emerging relations with Israel from mostly under-the-radar contacts and cooperation to full normalization. Every Arab state had backed the 2002 Arab Peace Initiative, which conditioned normalization with Israel on the establishment of a Palestinian state.¹¹ The practical effect was to give the Palestinian leadership – widely viewed as increasingly corrupt, incompetent, and incapable of making the difficult compromises necessary for peace – an effective veto over the ability of individual Arab states to pursue what they understood to be their growing national interest in having normal relations with the region’s most powerful military and advanced economy.

Decades of U.S. policy seemed only to reinforce this tight linkage. As recently as late 2016, U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry had claimed with unqualified certainty that – despite the steady increase in ties between Israel and several of its neighbors – there could be no separate peace between Israel and the Arab states without first resolving the Palestinian issue. “No, no, no, and no,” Kerry famously exclaimed to discredit the notion that normalization with some Arab countries could be pursued independently of major progress toward a Palestinian state.¹²

However, in 2020, several factors converged to enable a number of countries, led by the Emirates, to finally de-link their policies toward Israel from the Palestinian question, and set the stage for the Abraham Accords. The first, somewhat paradoxically, emerged out of a stillborn Palestinian peace plan unveiled by the Trump administration in January 2020, which resulted in an Israeli threat to extend its sovereignty to large portions of the West Bank that might otherwise have been reserved for a future Palestinian state.¹³ A visionary Emirati leadership seized this potential crisis to advance its longtime goal of diplomatic relations with Israel. Working with the Americans, the UAE made Israel an offer it couldn’t refuse: set aside annexation in return for full normalization of UAE-Israel relations.¹⁴ When, under U.S. pressure, Israel agreed, it provided the UAE with the cover it needed to claim that, by moving forward with normalization, it had actually delivered a major victory for the Palestinian cause by preserving the viability of an eventual two-state solution.¹⁵

Despite howls of protest from Palestinian leaders and charges of betrayal, the maneuver proved a masterstroke of diplomatic jujitsu. No longer would the Emirates’ ability to pursue its national interests with Israel be held hostage to the intractability of the decades-old Palestinian conflict. Underscoring just how far the region had evolved on the issue, the Arab League – which in 1979 had suspended Egypt’s membership in the wake of its peace treaty with Israel – rejected a Palestinian bid to condemn the Abraham Accords.¹⁶ And once the UAE had paved the way, the stage was set for Bahrain, Sudan, and Morocco to quickly follow with their own separate peace deals without significant reference to the Palestinian issue whatsoever.

D. Essential U.S. Role

The Trump administration's readiness to jump at the opportunity presented by the UAE's normalization offer – and to put enormous diplomatic energy into the pursuit of peace – was a critical factor in making the Accords possible. Ironically, while the long-term trend of U.S. retrenchment from the Middle East was for years a powerful driver pushing these countries together behind the scenes, in 2020 unqualified U.S. commitment was a *sine qua non* for actually moving their relations into the open. To the Trump administration's credit, once the opportunity became available and President Trump realized its historical and political significance, his administration quickly set aside its Palestinian proposal and made the pursuit of peace deals with the Arab states America's highest foreign policy priority for the final months of President Trump's term.

Not only did the administration put its full diplomatic weight behind the UAE offer by convincing Israel to drop annexation; it also made clear that, by making peace with Israel, the UAE and any other countries that agreed to normalization would be significantly improving their standing with the American people and Congress, and increasing America's stake in their country's wellbeing and security. Moreover, at least three of the four states also received specific inducements from the Trump administration that addressed a core national interest. The Emirates received a commitment to sell it F-35 combat aircraft and MQ-9 Reaper drones, highly advanced weapons systems that they had been previously denied.¹⁷ Morocco's longstanding desire for U.S. recognition of its sovereignty over the disputed Western Sahara was granted, and Sudan was removed from the U.S. list of state sponsors of terrorism while receiving a \$1 billion bridge loan.¹⁸

At the same time, the Trump administration's confrontational policy toward Iran clearly helped create a strategic context in which the UAE and Bahrain believed that they could manage the risks of making peace with Israel. As worried as they were by President Trump's desire to "get out" of the Middle East more broadly, their concerns were at least partially assuaged by the administration's "maximum pressure" policy of crippling economic sanctions and the stunning killing in January 2020 of General Qassem Soleimani, the irreplaceable mastermind of Iran's imperial project and its nationwide support for terrorism – and probably the regime's second-most powerful figure behind only the Supreme Leader. By bolstering their confidence that the United States would aggressively help deter and counter any Iranian blowback against them, President Trump's belligerent posture toward Tehran helped increase the UAE's and Bahrain's room for strategic maneuver with Israel.

E. Remarkable Early Successes of the Accords

The Abraham Accords have for the most part lived up to their promise of a "warm peace." In fact, they have largely sustained momentum in terms of building economic, cultural, and civil ties, even as active U.S. support became more passive in the early

months of the Biden administration. Since participating in a White House signing ceremony on September 15, 2020, the UAE and Bahrain publicly heralded and welcomed their new partnerships with Israel. Embassies have been opened and high-level visits exchanged, including the first official visit by an Israeli prime minister to Abu Dhabi.¹⁹ Direct flights have been initiated, with at least seven airlines now servicing the UAE-Israel route, offering multiple flight options daily.²⁰ Numerous memoranda of understanding (MOU) have been signed dealing with a broad spectrum of issues, including economic and financial cooperation, civil aviation, energy, healthcare, tourism, education, food and water security, communications, and even space exploration.

Bilateral trade between Israel and the UAE already is approaching \$1 billion per year and headed much higher.²¹ Despite the Covid-19 pandemic, hundreds of thousands of Israeli tourists and businesspeople have visited Dubai. Joint ventures between Israeli and Emirati companies are multiplying, as are major Emirati investments in Israel's energy and high-tech sectors.²² And working under U.S. auspices, both the UAE and Bahrain have begun open defense cooperation with Israel, including in November 2021 their first-ever joint naval exercise in the Red Sea, where Iranian ships are known to be heavily engaged in weapons smuggling and sanctions-busting activity.²³

Morocco's normalization agreement with Israel, which came three months after those of the UAE and Bahrain, also is showing significant progress in terms of economic, social, and strategic cooperation. As with its new Gulf partners, Israel now enjoys direct civilian flights to and from Morocco. The two countries signed an important cybersecurity agreement in July 2021, a month before the Israeli foreign minister visited Morocco in advance of upgrading diplomatic liaison offices to full embassies.²⁴ Shortly thereafter, a Moroccan publisher founded the Israel-based *Jerusalem Strategic Tribune* to amplify U.S. and Israeli support for regional normalization.²⁵ On the defense side, Morocco is buying Israeli military drones as well as counter-drone air defenses and, perhaps most remarkably, in November 2021 Morocco hosted the first visit by Israel's defense minister to one of the four Arab participants to the Abraham Accords, where he signed Israel's first-ever public bilateral security cooperation agreement with an Arab country.²⁶

By comparison, Israel's normalization with Sudan has to date been a disappointment, with little of substance to point to in building relations beyond pre-existing intelligence contacts. Severe political disagreements between the civilian and military elements of Sudan's transitional government, culminating in an October 2021 coup d'état, appear to have stalled any further movement on normalization for the immediate future.²⁷

Perhaps the greatest testament to the durability of the Accords and their grounding in shared national interests was the relatively muted public criticism of Israel by its new Arab partners during the May 2021 war with Hamas in Gaza.²⁸ The conflict proved something of a trial by fire for the Accords – still not yet a year old at the time – that they passed with flying colors. Very quickly after the conflict's conclusion, the parties were again forging ahead and setting new milestones in their budding diplomatic, economic, and even military relations.

Notably, the Accords appear to have injected healthy competition into Israel's first-generation peace treaties with Egypt and Jordan. As the Accords' economic and social benefits have become steadily more evident over the past year-plus, the governments of Egypt and Jordan have made a point of publicly broadening their own cooperation with Israel. Coincident with celebrations surrounding the one-year anniversary of the Accords, in September 2021 Egypt hosted the first public visit by an Israeli prime minister in a decade.²⁹ Egyptian President el-Sisi reportedly devoted more than half the meeting to his interest in expanding economic and civil cooperation with Israel; less than three weeks later Egypt's national airline announced its first-ever direct flights to Israel.³⁰ And in November 2021, banner headlines announced Israel, Jordan, and the UAE had reached an agreement, known as Project Prosperity, for an Emirati company to build a large solar power plant in Jordan that will provide electricity to a desalination plant in Israel, which in turn will provide much-needed clean water to Jordan.³¹ At the same time, however, persistent protests in Jordan against the deal and any broader improvement in relations with Israel served to highlight the importance of the "cold peace" vs. "warm peace" distinction.³²

The significant, in many ways unprecedented, forms of cooperation embodied in the Accords – and their high potential for further growth – augur a future in which America's longstanding allies are able to work together more concertedly to provide for their own security and prosperity, and to carry a greater burden in maintaining stability for the region as a whole and countering persistent threats from both radical Sunni Islamists and Iran. A more cohesive U.S.-led coalition, especially if it continues to expand to other countries, should also enable Washington to devote greater attention and resources to strategic competition with China and Russia in the Indo-Pacific and Eastern Europe, respectively, while at the same time protecting enduring U.S. interests in the Middle East – including against Beijing's and Moscow's growing efforts to increase their influence in the region.

IV. Findings

Based on the rapidly developing “warm peace” among Israel and its new partners, but also the challenges that lie ahead in realizing the full benefits of the Accords, this task force has reached several key findings that should inform and guide American policymakers as they assess the benefits of these historic agreements and seek to consolidate and expand them going forward, including in the defense sphere.

A. The Accords Are an Historic Achievement with Huge Potential to Advance U.S. Interests

Under normal circumstances, brokering the first normalization deal between Israel and an Arab state in 26 years would have been greeted with unanimous applause. Brokering four such deals in the space of several months would have been widely regarded as something of a diplomatic miracle. But that was not entirely the case with the Abraham Accords. Reactions in some quarters, especially among elements within the Democratic Party, were decidedly more mixed.³³

Some complained that the Accords were not so much peace deals as business transactions, in which Arab participation had been bought by U.S. promises of arms sales or diplomatic concessions. Some sought to downplay the Accords’ significance, suggesting they accomplished little more than bringing to the surface relations that already existed behind the scenes. Others criticized the Accords for doing nothing to resolve the Palestinian issue or other longstanding regional conflicts. Still others had their enthusiasm tempered by the fact that the Accords were the achievement of a highly polarizing president, Donald Trump, and an Israeli prime minister (Benjamin Netanyahu) and conservative Gulf Arab autocrat (UAE Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed) who were viewed as having aligned their countries far too closely with Trump’s presidency.³⁴

It is the assessment of this task force that such criticisms are unfounded. American inducements or side payments, including promises of military assistance, have long been a critical element of U.S. diplomacy, especially as concerns Arab-Israeli peace-making. Concrete manifestations of U.S. support have been essential for Arab leaders prepared to expose themselves and their nations to significant risk by breaking the region’s longstanding taboo on peace with Israel. The 1981 assassination of Egyptian President Anwar Sadat is lasting testament to that unfortunate reality.

While it is true that Israel for years had been developing unofficial ties with several Arab states, the diplomatic breakthrough of the Accords was an essential precondition for unlocking the full political, economic, and military potential of these relationships. In many cases, they have already taken qualitative leaps forward that would have been unthinkable in the absence of the Accords. And while the Accords may not have

resolved the Palestinian problem or any of the Middle East's other violent conflicts, they have created unprecedented opportunities for Arab-Israeli cooperation that, properly nurtured, could have positive effects on the region's stability, security, and prosperity for decades to come.

As such, this task force believes it is important to underscore for policymakers that strengthening and expanding the Abraham Accords is in the fundamental national security interests of the United States – regardless of the personalities involved in their provenance. Just as Israel's 1979 peace treaty with Egypt ended the era of major war between Israel and the Arab states, profoundly shaping the Middle East's strategic environment for the past 40 years, we believe the Abraham Accords have ushered in a new era of Arab-Israeli cooperation that could be no less impactful on the Middle East's trajectory for the next 40 years.

The emergence of a warm peace between Israel and a group of moderate Arab countries allied with the United States offers game-changing possibilities for the region. It promises to dramatically expand trade, investment, tourism, cultural understanding and tolerance, the development of the region's human capital, and collaborative efforts to meet a host of transnational challenges. It could immeasurably strengthen Israel's acceptance and integration as a vital part of its own neighborhood, while greatly enhancing the resilience of Arab economies and societies as they transition to a world that depends steadily less on oil.

Strategically, the Accords offer Washington a unique opportunity to bring its most important Middle East partners together for the first time ever as part of a coalition committed to bolstering the forces of regional order and peace against the forces of extremism and violence. By triggering a major realignment in Arab-Israeli relations, the Accords are shifting the regional balance of power in ways that could be overwhelmingly favorable to U.S. interests, especially if the circle of peace is successfully expanded to more nations. At a time when the United States needs to devote greater resources and energy to countering the rise of an authoritarian China in the Indo-Pacific and a revanchist Russia in Europe, the Accords provide an ideal platform for increased burden sharing that empowers America's most capable regional partners to do more together in defense of Middle East stability and security.

Being the architect and driving force behind the emergence of a new and historic pro-American political, economic, and security order in the Middle East – a genuinely “new Middle East” – would do wonders for U.S. international leadership and credibility, especially in the aftermath of the damaging withdrawal from Afghanistan. It would underscore how neither China, Russia, nor any other major power has the diplomatic wherewithal to broker Israel's reconciliation with the vast majority of the Arab and Muslim worlds, and that the United States remains the region's leading power broker. Exercising that influence to deepen and expand the Accords offers the opportunity for an ongoing series of diplomatic victories that would significantly enhance America's

international prestige, power, and strategic posture without requiring any direct application of U.S. military force.

B. U.S. Leadership Remains Essential to the Accords' Success

As noted above, fear of U.S. retrenchment pushed several Arab states and Israel closer together over the past decade. But it was aggressive U.S. diplomacy and engagement that were absolutely critical to making the Abraham Accords a reality in 2020. Going forward, American leadership and support will remain central for strengthening the Accords, expanding them to other countries, and ensuring they reach their full potential, especially in the sensitive area of defense cooperation.

From the moment the UAE's ambassador to the United States, Yousef Al Otaiba, conveyed to Washington his country's offer to normalize relations with Israel in exchange for shelving annexation, the Trump administration became the indispensable mediator for hammering out a deal. Throughout July 2020, American negotiators, led by President Trump's son-in-law and top Middle East advisor, Jared Kushner, shuttled between Ambassador Otaiba and the Israeli ambassador, Ron Dermer. Indeed, the three sides never actually met together until the deal was finalized, as the Emiratis reportedly insisted that Israel's commitment to peace be made not just to the UAE, but also to both countries' most important strategic partner – the United States. Furthermore, when it appeared that Israeli domestic politics were causing Prime Minister Netanyahu to waver just a day before the deal's August 13 announcement, an aggressive intervention by the U.S. ambassador to Israel, David Friedman, reportedly convinced Netanyahu that backing out was not an option.³⁵

Active U.S. support and commitment continued to be essential from there forward. On the same day President Trump announced Israel-UAE normalization, a senior Bahraini official reached out to the U.S. negotiating team to tell them that “we want to be next.” The UAE move, and U.S. involvement, provided the cover that Bahrain felt it needed to take its own secret relationship with Israel public. Over the next four weeks, and concluding just four days before the rollout of the Accords at an official White House signing ceremony that included Netanyahu and the Emirati and Bahraini foreign ministers, more than a half dozen senior Trump administration officials conducted intense discussions to finish the second normalization agreement on September 11.³⁶ Before finalizing the deal, the administration also made sure that Saudi Arabia was supportive of the Bahraini move. Shortly after the September 15 White House event concluded, Ambassador Otaiba remarked that “the United States government came through every single time. And that's the reason we had the signing ceremony.”³⁷

Building on the momentum created by the initial Accords, the White House then began working with other countries interested in following a similar path with Israel. Just a month after the September ceremony, Trump administration officials – with the president's active involvement – secured a third normalization agreement with Sudan.³⁸

An advisor to Sudan's government involved in the negotiations said explicitly that Khartoum's primary purpose in moving ahead with Israel was to "get through to the White House" and get off the State Department's terrorism list.³⁹ Further underscoring the importance of the U.S. role, a senior Sudanese diplomat remarked on the Accords' first anniversary that Khartoum could not move ahead in deepening cooperation with Israel until the two countries publicly finalize an agreement at the White House.⁴⁰ Finally, in December 2020, Morocco became the fourth country in three months to establish full diplomatic relations with Israel, after concerted U.S. direct negotiations with the Moroccan government.⁴¹

As previously mentioned, U.S. "sweeteners" were an essential element in helping convince the UAE, Sudan and Morocco to normalize ties with Israel. Together with Bahrain, they also understood the high priority the Trump administration attached to the normalization process, and no doubt believed that establishing full relations with Israel would significantly improve their standing in the United States regardless of the administration in power, as well as with an overwhelmingly pro-Israel U.S. Congress and public. Especially in an era when the widely-held perception is that Washington is looking to trim its heavy military investment in the Middle East, all of the Arab participants in the Accords certainly calculated that by establishing their bona fides as courageous peacemakers with Israel, they would bolster America's long-term stake in the stability and security of their countries.

Going forward, concerted U.S. involvement will remain critical for consolidating the Accords and ensuring they achieve their full strategic potential to safeguard American national security interests in the Middle East. Of particular interest to this task force are the increasingly prevalent signs – just over a year since the White House signing ceremony – of slowly expanding security cooperation among the participants to the Accords. The first-ever combined military exercise conducted by Israeli, Emirati, and Bahraini naval ships in conjunction with the U.S. Fifth Fleet underscored the vital role that active American leadership and engagement can play in mobilizing increased cooperation among Israel and its Arab neighbors – especially in the highly sensitive defense sector where Iranian warnings and threats against its Gulf neighbors have been the most explicit.⁴²

For both the UAE and Bahrain, the stakes are extraordinarily high. Their vulnerabilities to Iranian retaliation are significant. Both are situated in very close geographic proximity to Iran, with only the narrow waterways of the Persian Gulf separating them. The UAE's economic links to Iran are extensive and several hundred thousand Iranian nationals live in the Emirates. As for Bahrain, Iran has long made historical claims to the island, and has actively worked over the years to sow dissension, violence, and terrorism among Bahrain's majority Shiite population against the Sunni ruling family.⁴³ In that perilous context, sustained American leadership and support, including steps like maintaining an unequivocal commitment to keeping the U.S. Fifth Fleet headquartered in Bahrain, will be essential for providing these countries with the confidence and space they need to continue gradually increasing their defense links to Israel.

By fostering growing military-to-military ties, Washington can help build the connective tissue and shared experiences between Israel and its Arab neighbors that can enhance their capabilities to uphold regional stability, thereby reducing the direct burdens on the U.S. military. At the same time, consistent U.S. engagement and support for the Accords, including in the defense area, can temper the appeal or urgency for its members to hedge toward Iran or to consider stronger strategic ties with China and Russia – both of whom actively offer themselves as alternative security providers to the United States, and both of whom harbor strong ambitions to make greater regional inroads at America’s direct expense.

U.S. leadership will also be critical to expanding the normalization process to additional countries. The more Washington can do to help consolidate the existing Accords and maximize their value proposition to its members, the more attractive such arrangements will become to other U.S.-aligned actors around the Middle East. Furthermore, as the months just before and after the 2020 White House ceremony illustrated, a visible and sustained American role in the normalization process, including the provision of compelling U.S. incentives, were critical for convincing additional countries to jump on the bandwagon once the initial Israel-UAE agreement was in place. Going forward, unambiguous U.S. messaging that widening the circle of peace with Israel is among Washington’s highest foreign policy priorities, and will result in a significant upgrading in their bilateral relations with the United States, will continue to be an essential element in the cost-benefit calculation of Arab and Muslim states as they weigh the risks of moving ahead with full normalization.

C. Biden Administration Too Slow in Embracing the Accords

Like his two immediate predecessors, President Biden ran on a platform based partly on reducing America’s commitments and presence in the Middle East. As he wrote in spring 2020, “it is past time to end the forever wars . . . we should bring the vast majority of our troops home from the wars in Afghanistan and the Middle East,” while also “more effectively pushing back against Iran’s destabilizing activities.”⁴⁴

Initially, it appeared that perhaps the new administration might see the Abraham Accords as a useful mechanism to reconcile these seemingly contradictory positions. In his January 2021 confirmation hearing, Secretary of State nominee Antony Blinken declared “I support the Abraham Accords. I applaud the work that was done to achieve them. I think they have significantly advanced the security for Israel and for the countries involved. It opens new perspectives and prospects with regard to travel, to business, to trade, all of which is very, very positive and I would hope that we have an opportunity to build on them, going forward.”⁴⁵ At his own confirmation proceedings, Secretary of Defense nominee Lloyd Austin stated that the Accords “put a bit more pressure on Iran.”⁴⁶ In February, Secretary Blinken responded to an interviewer’s question by reiterating that “whenever we see Israel and its neighbors normalizing relations, improving

relations, that's good for Israel, it's good for the other countries in question, it's good for overall peace and security.”⁴⁷

However, while periodically paying lip service to the Accords when responding to congressional or press inquiries, the Biden administration during its first seven months in office demonstrated no real initiative or enthusiasm when it came to taking concrete action to advance them. There were no visible policies or strategies put forward to seize upon the normalization momentum inherited from the Trump administration.

On the contrary, it quickly became evident that widening the circle of Middle East peace had moved down the list of U.S. priorities. Instead, the Biden team's energies were far more focused on getting all U.S. troops out of Afghanistan, ending the conflict in Yemen, and resurrecting the Iran nuclear deal – all of which, in varying degrees, tended to raise concerns rather than inspire confidence among America's regional partners. Whether intended or not, early moves by the administration such as rescinding the terrorism designation against Iran-backed Houthi rebels in Yemen, suspending the sale of weapons to Saudi Arabia, and denouncing former President Trump's “maximum pressure” policy against Iran were all interpreted as signs that America's commitments to defending its friends and deterring its adversaries in the Middle East were changing in ways that would be less conducive to advancing Arab-Israeli peace.⁴⁸

Specific signs of the administration's ambivalence were not hard to find. Even as Secretary Blinken was praising the Accords in his confirmation hearing, he spoke skeptically about the U.S. inducements that had played such a central role in making them possible, indicating “there are certain commitments that may have been made in the context of getting those countries to normalize relations with Israel that I think we should take a hard look at.”⁴⁹ Given its concerns about UAE-China ties and the associated risks to sensitive U.S. defense technologies, the administration put a hold on the sale of F-35s and MQ-9s to the UAE for several months before allowing it to proceed, though this hiccup likely contributed to the Emirates' December 2021 decision to halt the deal.⁵⁰ The administration also let it be known it was conducting a review of President Trump's decision to recognize Moroccan sovereignty over the Western Sahara, which temporarily paused Morocco's forward movement with Israel. Months later, the administration reportedly informed Morocco privately that its predecessor's commitment would not be reversed, but neither President Biden nor Secretary Blinken have been prepared to say so publicly.⁵¹

Perhaps most conspicuous was an April 1 press briefing by State Department spokesperson Ned Price that went viral in the Middle East. In an awkward back and forth with a reporter on what the administration called Israel's normalization deals with the UAE, Bahrain, Morocco, and Sudan, Price went to extraordinary lengths to avoid using the term “Abraham Accords” – a performance met with significant consternation by several Arab signatories in particular, who felt that they had taken significant risks to embrace peace with Israel at Washington's urging, but were now being undercut by the Biden team's apparent efforts to distance themselves from the Accords. When,

months later, President Biden’s nominee to be the State Department’s top diplomat for the Middle East failed to even mention the Accords or normalization in the prepared testimony for her confirmation hearing, it too was taken as one more indicator that, at minimum, building on President Trump’s peace efforts was not at the forefront of the administration’s to-do list.⁵²

When asked on a podcast in August 2021 to explain President Biden’s decidedly restrained approach to the Abraham Accords, the *New York Times* columnist and Middle East expert Tom Friedman – avowedly anti-Trump, but a supporter of the Accords -- offered a lengthy disquisition on the current administration’s seeming ambivalence:

“A lot of the Biden foreign policy people are Obama foreign policy people. And I’ll put this bluntly – they didn’t like the Gulfies. They didn’t like the UAE. They didn’t like Saudi Arabia.... Taking down the Iranian regime, destroying the Iranian nuclear program, they saw as not an American interest, but as an Israeli interest, and they saw the Gulf states as handmaidens in promoting that interest in Washington.... So I think there are a lot of mixed feelings and cross currents here that, quite honestly, they haven’t sorted out.... They don’t like a lot of these people culturally, and they don’t like the idea of building on something that Trump and, ‘Oh my God’, Jared Kushner built. And so they’re going to have to sort out all of these mixed feelings.”⁵³

Friedman’s advice for the Biden team was blunt: “My view is get over it. Be big boys. We have a fundamental American interest in widening and strengthening the Abraham Accords.”⁵⁴

Importantly, there were growing indications starting in fall 2021 that the administration’s posture toward the Accords was indeed shifting for the better. Perhaps not by accident, the change coincided with its attempts to recover from several key policy failures, including its counterproductive attempts to conciliate the Houthis in Yemen – which backfired literally on Saudi Arabia in the form of an intensification of Houthi attacks – as well as stalled talks with Iran to reenter the JCPOA and the disastrous collapse of U.S. policy in Afghanistan. The administration was urgently trying to quell fears about a broader U.S. abandonment of the Middle East, and aligning itself with the positive agenda of the Abraham Accords offered a ready-made opportunity to demonstrate continued U.S. leadership, engagement, and commitment to peace and security in the region.

By mid-September, State Department spokesman Price was regularly referring to “the Abraham Accords” in his daily press briefings, emphasizing that the administration “continues to support these agreements and their signatories,” and that it “looks forward to opportunities to further expand and advance cooperation between Israel and countries around the world.”⁵⁵ The State Department also rushed to organize an online event for Secretary Blinken with officials from Israel, the UAE, Bahrain, and Morocco to mark the Accords’ first anniversary – though on September 17, two days after the

actual anniversary date, and without enough advance notice to allow participation by the Emirati and Bahraini foreign ministers who were present at the September 2020 White House signing ceremony.⁵⁶

The following month, Secretary Blinken brought the Israeli and Emirati foreign ministers to Washington for a trilateral meeting to discuss ways to further deepen the Accords, and praised them as “transformative partnerships.” Commenting after the gathering, an Israeli official noted that the Biden administration had come to the understanding that the Accords “can be a win for them after Afghanistan.”⁵⁷ Around the same time, National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan traveled to Saudi Arabia and became the highest-ranking Biden administration official to meet with Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, the kingdom’s de facto leader whom the administration had previously sought to marginalize due to his role in the 2018 murder of U.S.-based columnist Jamal Khashoggi. Importantly, Sullivan raised the issue of Riyadh normalizing its relations with Israel – which MBS did not rule out, but instead indicated a list of steps that should occur first, particularly in the area of improving the U.S.-Saudi bilateral relationship.⁵⁸ Finally, during a trip to Jakarta in December, Secretary Blinken reportedly discussed with Indonesia, the world’s largest Muslim-majority country, the possibility of normalizing relations with Israel – further evidence that expanding the Accords increasingly featured in the talking points of senior administration officials.⁵⁹

D. Saudi Arabia is the Big Prize, but Very Challenging

In trying to explain the Biden administration’s approach to the Abraham Accords, *New York Times* columnist Tom Friedman trenchantly observed that “the Biden people have to sort out to what extent do we want to own the Abraham Accords and vault them forward? And the only way to vault them forward is to bring Saudi Arabia into them and to use the leverage of Saudi Arabia.”⁶⁰ While overstated, Friedman’s point hit on a fundamental truth that most observers of the Abraham Accords do not dispute: Saudi Arabia is the big historic prize.

Normalization between the Saudis and Israel certainly offers the greatest opportunity to consolidate, legitimize, and expand the Accords. However, it also faces unique challenges and obstacles that could prove difficult to overcome in the near term. But even short of full normalization, important concrete progress in Saudi-Israeli relations is still achievable – especially if Washington is prepared to provide such an effort with strong backing, including in the coin of America’s bilateral relationship with the kingdom.

Owing to its energy largesse and its unique roles as the birthplace of Islam’s prophet and the custodian of its two holiest mosques, Saudi Arabia is the Arab and Muslim worlds’ richest power as well as one of the most influential. Consequently, any Saudi decision to formalize its relations with Israel would represent a qualitative leap forward for regional stability and U.S. interests. It would create political cover and legitimacy for the majority of the world’s Arab and Muslim states, stretching from North Africa

and the Sahel to Southeast Asia, to establish their own official relations with Israel. For all intents and purposes, it would mark the beginning of the end of both Israel's seven-decade-long conflict with the Arab states as well as the estrangement of Jewish and Muslim communities on a global scale. It would certainly be the stuff that Nobel Peace Prizes are made of.

Perhaps to an even greater extent than in the case of the UAE, closer and more formal Saudi ties with the Jewish state also would create significant economic opportunities, given the kingdom's vast energy wealth and ambitious Vision 2030 plan to grow and diversify its economy by courting foreign investment.⁶¹ Its inclusion also would cement the Accords geostrategically by creating a belt of U.S.-aligned states, officially at peace with one another, stretching from the Persian Gulf through the heart of the Middle East to the Eastern Mediterranean and North Africa. This would help counter Iran's own military entrenchment and growing regional footprint; more generally, it would significantly bolster the prospects and combined power of a new U.S.-led regional security architecture in the Middle East.

It is important to note that Riyadh's public and private support for the Accords to date has already been invaluable to their progress. There is little doubt that Bahrain, and perhaps other Arab participants, would never have been willing or able to proceed with normalization without assurances of Saudi backing, much less if they had faced outright Saudi opposition. Beyond verbal support, the Saudis also took important concrete steps to facilitate the Accords, including by opening their airspace for direct commercial flights between Israel and the UAE and Bahrain.⁶² And just over two months after the initial Accords were signed, at a point when Joe Biden was already the president-elect, MBS sent another positive signal by "secretly" hosting Prime Minister Netanyahu and Secretary of State Mike Pompeo at a meeting in the Red Sea city of Neom.⁶³

A year into the Biden administration, what exactly may be possible in terms of greater Saudi participation in the Accords hinges largely on the calculations of leaders in Riyadh and Washington. Though MBS is clearly the kingdom's day-to-day decision maker, on the issue of normalization with Israel, his elderly and ailing father, King Salman, is reportedly reluctant to move forward absent significant progress to resolve the Palestinian issue along the lines of the 2002 Arab Peace Initiative (otherwise referred to as the Saudi Peace Initiative).

For his part, MBS is known to be privately contemptuous of the Palestinian leadership and, like his counterparts in the UAE and other countries, chafes at the Palestinians' historical veto power over Saudi Arabia's ability to pursue more fulsome relations with Israel and take advantage of the significant benefits that would accrue to the kingdom in terms of trade, investment, technology, and security. Yet at least to some extent, Riyadh must balance these upsides against the domestic political risks of being perceived as abandoning the Palestinians by making peace with Israel. Whether and under what conditions MBS might be prepared to try and change the king's mind on

normalization, or has instead decided to wait until his own ascension to the throne before tackling the issue, is not known with any certainty.

Apart from the Palestinian issue, MBS is also known to calibrate his ambitious Vision 2030 reform program to what a traditionally conservative Saudi public seems prepared to tolerate, if not outright support. The crown prince reportedly studies mounds of data based on widespread polling, monitoring of social media, and other social science tools to keep his pulse on the attitude of the Saudi people toward his major initiatives – from opening the kingdom to Western music concerts to easing guardianship laws on women to cracking down on the power of the religious police and extremist clerics.⁶⁴ And while the 70 percent of the kingdom’s citizens under the age of 30 appear largely to have rallied to MBS’s sweeping domestic reforms that they see clearly impacting their day-to-day lives for the better, normalizing relations with Israel – a country long demonized in the Saudi media, educational and religious curricula, and popular culture – appears to have gained far less public purchase. While MBS has engaged in a steady effort over several years to shift deeply ingrained public attitudes toward Israel and the Jewish people – including through his own public statements, the Saudi media, school textbook reform, and interfaith outreach – the process is a gradual one. Given MBS’s overriding preoccupation with pursuing his priority of domestic reform, and with an eye to any potential conservative backlash that adversaries like Iran and the Islamic State will no doubt seek to exploit, MBS’s appetite for taking on the challenges of full normalization with Israel, in contrast to continuing with his more incremental under-the-radar approach, may well be constrained for the immediate future.

The Biden administration and its posture toward the kingdom in general, and toward MBS personally, is another factor that no doubt looms large in MBS’s calculations about the risks he is prepared to take in moving ahead with Israel. MBS’s role in Khashoggi’s 2018 murder and the war in Yemen have cast a long shadow that will be hard for a Democratic president to overcome. During his presidential campaign, President Biden called Saudi Arabia a “pariah” with “no redeeming social value.” Less than two months into his presidency, he authorized the public release of a U.S. intelligence report alleging MBS’s approval of Khashoggi’s murder, imposed travel bans and financial sanctions on associated Saudi officials, and ended U.S. support for Saudi military operations in Yemen – including the kingdom’s efforts to destroy launch sites that Houthi rebels have used to fire hundreds of rockets, missiles, and drones against Saudi civilians.⁶⁵ And despite MBS’s position as the kingdom’s de facto day-to-day ruler, and the natural interlocutor for heads of state around the world, the Biden administration also went out of its way to make clear that the President would not have any direct dealings with the crown prince.⁶⁶

Even these moves did not go far enough for many in the President’s own party, some of whom as members of Congress responded by introducing bills to ban MBS from the United States and condition U.S. arms sales to the kingdom.⁶⁷ Well-connected analysts even went so far as to advocate that no American official whatsoever should have any dealings with MBS, and strongly hint that Washington should conduct an

influence campaign within the Saudi royal family to stop MBS from ascending to the throne once King Salman's reign ends.⁶⁸

Combined with its efforts to resurrect the Iran nuclear deal and abandon President Trump's policy of maximum pressure, the Biden administration's early focus on downgrading the U.S.-Saudi relationship and marginalizing MBS almost certainly affected the crown prince's calculations with respect to normalization. At this point, it is hard to imagine MBS making substantial progress toward normalization without a significant uptick in the quality of the kingdom's bilateral ties with President Biden and his team. As MBS reportedly suggested to National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan in September, while the possibility of Saudi-Israeli normalization remains on the table, he first needs to see a series of positive changes in the bilateral U.S.-Saudi relationship.⁶⁹

In that context, the Biden administration's decision to press ahead in November 2021 with its first major arms sale to the kingdom, despite significant Democratic opposition in Congress, appeared to be an important indicator of the emergence of a more nuanced approach toward the Saudis. The \$650 million sale of defensive air-to-air missiles suggests some reversal of the White House's previous softening of support for Riyadh, after attempts to conciliate the Houthis in early 2021 contributed directly to heightened drone and missile attacks on the kingdom by Iran's Yemeni proxy. More broadly, the sale reflects a growing appreciation within the administration of the degree to which U.S. interests still heavily depend on Riyadh's support and cooperation – from moderating the price of oil to containing Iranian aggression to bolstering regional stability.⁷⁰

What further adjustments the administration would be willing or able to take in its approach toward MBS and the Saudis is unclear. For sure, the more ambitious the steps that MBS is asked to take toward normalization, the higher the price he will demand in terms of bringing him in from the cold and addressing Saudi security needs. For President Biden, any of the moves he might take toward rapprochement with MBS – for example, a phone call, meeting on the margins of a G-20 meeting, visiting him in the kingdom, receiving him in the Oval Office, or even resuming the sale of precision-guided munitions to counter Houthi missile and drone attacks – would almost certainly precipitate outrage among vocal elements of his own party, regardless of MBS's other actions going forward. President Biden would need to weigh that potential domestic political cost against the corresponding strategic benefits that would flow to the United States from bringing the Arab and Muslim worlds' most influential state into the circle of peace with Israel, and thereby unlocking a cascade of additional normalization deals.

Of course, President Biden may well not be prepared to accept that tradeoff. And MBS, as suggested above, may be inhibited from moving forward on normalization by a completely separate set of domestic and regional constraints and considerations – no matter how attractive the package of bilateral incentives on offer from the United States may be. In that case, while lowering its aspirations, the Biden administration should still be active in exploring opportunities, most urgently in the realm of air defense cooperation, to inject new momentum into the Saudi-Israeli relationship short of normalization.

E. Israel's Move to CENTCOM Is Crucial

In January 2021, shortly before leaving office, President Trump ordered that Israel be reassigned from the area of responsibility (AOR) of the Pentagon's European Command (EUCOM) to that of Central Command (CENTCOM).⁷¹ The U.S. military divides its global presence among seven geographically-based combatant commands, which in CENTCOM's case includes much of the broader Middle East. Each combatant command implements national defense policy in its AOR, including by serving as the main vehicle for regional cooperation on everything from diplomacy and strategy to operations, training, doctrine, logistics, intelligence, technology, and procurement.⁷²

For decades, historical animosities in the Middle East prevented the United States from including Israel in CENTCOM's AOR, but the changing regional order embodied in the Accords opened up a much wider range of possibilities for U.S.-led efforts to build defense cooperation and military-to-military ties between Israel and its neighbors.⁷³ With Israel now part of CENTCOM, nearly every CENTCOM activity involving partner nations – from seminars and conferences to working groups, task forces, humanitarian missions, and multilateral exercises – offers the potential to further integrate the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) into the region's security architecture and deepen its ties to different U.S.-aligned Arab militaries.

Given America's role as the main strategic partner for most of these nations, there are tremendous opportunities for the United States, working through CENTCOM, to start shaping the nascent, and still ad hoc, partnerships between members of the Abraham Accords, Egypt, and Jordan, as well other willing countries into a more coherent regional security architecture. And as U.S. partner countries in CENTCOM's AOR – particularly Israel, the UAE, Egypt, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia – develop stronger diplomatic and defense ties with U.S. strategic partners in neighboring regions like Greece, Cyprus, and India, this creates new possibilities for a set of U.S.-organized, interconnected multilateral coalitions of the willing that could serve as an arc of stability extending from North Africa and the Eastern Mediterranean through the Red Sea and Persian Gulf to the Indian Ocean.⁷⁴

Since Israel's transfer to CENTCOM became official on September 1, 2021, several key initial steps toward greater diplomatic and military cooperation with its Middle East neighbors, including its fellow Accords members, have already taken place under CENTCOM's auspices. Foreign Minister Lapid's public visit to Bahrain late that month – the first such trip by a senior Israeli official – included a highly-publicized tour with his Bahraini counterpart of the headquarters in Manama of U.S. Naval Forces Central Command (NAVCENT) and a U.S. Navy amphibious-landing support ship. At a press conference with the Bahraini foreign minister and NAVCENT's commander, Lapid emphasized that "Israel, Bahrain, and the U.S. are partners."⁷⁵ The following month, a senior Israeli security official noted how his country's move to CENTCOM was making possible "improved and intensified" defense coordination with Arab countries.⁷⁶ In

November, Israel's first-ever public joint military exercise with Bahrain and the UAE, focused specifically on countering Iranian weapons smuggling and protecting freedom of navigation against Iranian naval threats, took place in the Red Sea in close coordination with U.S. forces from NAVCENT.⁷⁷

F. Already Demonstrating High Potential for Defense Cooperation

While unprecedented – indeed, historic – progress in building economic and social relations has rightly dominated the first year of the Accords, much less attention has been paid to matters of hard power, in particular new opportunities that have emerged to dramatically scale up defense cooperation and military-to-military ties between Israel and its neighbors. In addition to Foreign Minister Lapid's Manama visit in September and the subsequent U.S.-Israel-UAE-Bahrain exercises in the Red Sea, both of which were intended as clear deterrent messages to Tehran, the Accords already are making possible a flurry of other historic firsts in terms of security cooperation.

At least as far back as February 2021, Israeli companies began attending defense exhibitions in the UAE, leading the following month to the first-ever MOU between defense contractors from both countries – in this case, an agreement to develop systems utilizing missiles, lasers and electromagnetic pulses against drones like those increasingly used by Iran and its proxies in attacks around the Middle East.⁷⁸ In late October, the chief of staff of the Emirati Air Force arrived in Israel, the first senior Emirati military official to visit publicly, where he observed the largest air exercise ever hosted by Israel. He also participated in a U.S.-led conference of countries planning to fly the F-35 combat aircraft.⁷⁹ Following the drill, Israel's chief of air operations stated publicly that his country “was looking forward to hosting the Emirates air force” in the future, and the American commander of CENTCOM air forces said the United States was considering holding joint air exercises with Israel, the UAE, and Bahrain.⁸⁰

Around the same time, in a major show of force clearly directed at Tehran, U.S. B-1B strategic bombers twice circumnavigated the Middle East, including flying over maritime chokepoints at Hormuz and Bab-el-Mandeb that have been plagued for years by attacks on shipping by Iran and its proxies. Reflecting the potential for expanded regional defense coordination beyond just the Accords' initial members, the U.S. aircraft received sequential escorts from Israeli, Egyptian, Bahraini and – importantly – Saudi fighter jets.⁸¹ In another first, the Israeli Air Force's (IAF) chief of staff reciprocated his Emirati counterpart's public visit to Israel by attending the Dubai Airshow in mid-November 2021, during which Israeli and Emirati state-owned defense companies signed an agreement to co-develop autonomous naval vessels that could help counter regionwide Iranian naval threats.⁸²

Most recently, in late November, Defense Minister Gantz made the first acknowledged trip to Morocco by a top Israeli security official, during which the two countries pub-

licly inked a long-term defense cooperation MOU – another first, insofar as Israel had never before signed such an agreement with an Arab state. The deal, which would have seemed unthinkable even just several months before, paves the way for bilateral intelligence sharing, joint exercises, arms sales, and defense-industrial cooperation, including possible co-production of armed drones.⁸³

V. Recommendations

A. Send Clear Signals of U.S. Support for Strengthening and Expanding the Accords

To maximize the success of the Accords, tangible bipartisan backing is vital. The unpredictable and sudden swings in U.S. policy following national elections, and the larger domestic political divisions they represent, have created uncertainty about America’s future intentions and its support for the Accords moving forward. In this light, both the Biden administration and Congress should take steps to underscore for America’s allies and adversaries that consolidating the existing Accords, including by deepening defense cooperation, and expanding them to include new members are among Washington’s highest priorities. Specific initiatives could include the following:

Appoint a Special U.S. Envoy for Normalization

Appointing a U.S. Special Envoy would convey an unmistakable signal that strengthening the Accords and expanding them to new countries has been elevated to one of the Biden administration’s highest foreign policy priorities. Indeed, the Biden administration already has assigned special envoys to signal and address some of its key foreign policy concerns like climate change, Iran nuclear negotiations, and ending the war in Yemen.

Convene an Arab-Israeli Summit on Middle East Security

Building on the existing Accords, President Biden should also consider launching a high-profile diplomatic initiative to establish a new U.S.-led bipartisan vision and strategic framework for Middle East security. Such an effort would signal unambiguously to the world the administration’s whole-hearted embrace of the normalization process and its centrality to U.S. strategy for securing America’s vital interests in the Middle East in the coming decades. This could include inviting the leaders of Israel and its Arab peace partners – including Egypt and Jordan – to a summit, perhaps at the White House or Camp David, to inaugurate a process of U.S.-led multilateral consultations on how best to deepen coordination and advance regional security. Priority areas would include military exercises, maritime security, defense-technology research and development (R&D), and integrated air defenses against missiles and drones.

This new coalition could be institutionalized through the creation of working groups that would meet regularly to discuss initiatives, develop work plans, and monitor progress between annual or biannual leadership summits. While the initial participants might be limited to those Arab countries that have already made peace with Israel, membership should clearly be open to other U.S. regional partners prepared to actively contribute to its mission of building a new U.S.-led coalition to bolster stability and security in the broader Middle East through enhanced consultations, defense cooperation, and military-to-military ties that include Israel as an integral participant.

Pass an Abraham Accords Defense Cooperation Act

In parallel with steps by the Biden administration, Congress should lend its voice and American resources in support of deepening and broadening Israeli-Arab defense ties. A clear statement of congressional support for the Accords, similar to that contained in the pending Israel Relations Normalization Act, would be valuable, as would the requirement that the Secretary of State lead development of a comprehensive U.S. strategy to strengthen and widen the Accords, including in the defense sphere.⁸⁴

In consultation with the administration, Congress also should develop an Abraham Accords Defense Cooperation Act. Such legislation would identify specific priority areas for the United States to focus its efforts and resources in deepening partnerships with Israel and its Arab neighbors, including but not limited to provisions such as:

- Directing the Secretary of Defense to consult with counterparts in Israel and Arab states on 1) opportunities and challenges in terms of establishing a common air operational picture and integrated regional air defense network against missile and drone threats from Iran and its Middle Eastern proxies, and 2) roles the United States could play in bringing such efforts to fruition as effectively and promptly as possible;
- Authorizing the establishment of an Abraham Accords Defense Technology Foundation consisting of the U.S. government, Israel, and Arab partners to identify, catalyze, and promote cooperative R&D projects between their defense industries to develop high-priority military technologies; and
- Expanding existing bilateral U.S.-Israeli cooperation on countering unmanned aerial systems (C-UAS) into a multilateral initiative that leverages the significant resources of Israel's new peace partners.

B. Be Flexible, But Ambitious, In Developing Defense Cooperation

The Biden administration should maintain an attitude of flexibility when it comes to deepening defense cooperation among members of the Accords. It will have to guard against overreaching in its efforts to forge a new Middle East security architecture, and it must remain attuned to the sensitivities and constraints of Israel's new Arab partners. In particular, the administration needs to be cognizant of potential brakes on how far, fast, and openly countries like the UAE can go in building defense relations with Israel, given their real concerns that Iran and other adversaries invariably will view such activities as directed at countering them.

For these reasons, concerted efforts should be made to frame defense cooperation initiatives as occurring squarely under U.S. coordination and in terms not specifically aimed at Iran, but rather as supporting positive international norms and rules such as freedom of navigation and self-defense, as well as enforcing UN sanctions resolutions prohibiting arms proliferation and weapons smuggling.

At the same time, however, the administration must avoid aiming too low, forswearing too much risk, or turning back at the first sign of unexpected difficulty. It should be opportunistic, ready to take full advantage of unprecedented – and potentially unexpected – geopolitical openings for stronger defense cooperation among America's regional partners. Indeed, the very existence of the Accords, and the speed at which they came together over several months in 2020, confirms how quickly and dramatically long-entrenched taboos in the Middle East can be shattered – including on security cooperation. Very few could have imagined that less than a year after Israel and Morocco made peace, the Israeli defense minister would fly to Rabat with uniformed IDF officers, be received publicly with full pomp and circumstance by Morocco's senior defense and military leaders, and sign a framework agreement establishing the first long-term defense partnership between Israel and an Arab state.

Accordingly, a U.S. strategy for building defense cooperation should include a menu of options ranging from areas that are relatively low-risk, uncontroversial, and easy to implement, to harder and more complex initiatives that could generate greater political blowback and take more time to execute. By demonstrating the tangible benefits of closer security cooperation, focusing initially on more incremental steps also can build momentum and support to begin tackling more ambitious efforts, attract new members to the Accords, and underscore for allies and adversaries alike that the United States remains committed to promoting regional stability.

Based on this strategic approach, an initial U.S.-led agenda should focus on several priority areas that are both ripe for initial progress and offer a high ceiling for even more significant cooperation:

Integrate Israel More Fully into CENTCOM

U.S. Central Command offers a natural locus to begin incrementally consolidating Arab-Israel security cooperation under American auspices. An initial agenda should focus on integrating Israel into CENTCOM structures and activities alongside U.S. and Arab partner militaries, all of whom could benefit substantially from the IDF's unique capabilities and deep operational experience.

The Pentagon already has invited the IDF to assign a liaison officer to CENTCOM headquarters in Tampa; a logical next step would be to have a similar officer assigned to NAVCENT headquarters in Bahrain, which plays host to several multinational maritime task forces operating in Middle Eastern waters. Jerusalem would have a clear interest in such cooperation, given both Iran's use of the region's seaways to proliferate missiles and drones and the fact that Israeli-affiliated ships have been targeted around the region by Tehran repeatedly since 2020.⁸⁵

Joint exercises in CENTCOM's AOR – like that of November 2021 in the Red Sea among the United States, Israel, the UAE, and Bahrain – represent another obvious area of potential growth. CENTCOM should be focused on creating additional such training opportunities across land, sea, air, and cyber domains. These exercises build military-to-military ties, increase interoperability, and bolster deterrence and operational effectiveness against shared threats in areas like counterterrorism, weapons proliferation, defense against missiles and drones, gray zone warfare, and special operations. Wherever possible, CENTCOM should encourage already-established multinational exercises hosted by Israel's Arab partners like Egypt (Bright Star) and the UAE (Iron Union) to include Israel, and vice versa with Israeli exercises (e.g., Blue Flag). Washington also should encourage Israel and its new Arab partners to train and plan together under U.S. auspices in activities that occur outside CENTCOM's AOR, such as the Red Flag aerial combat drills in the continental United States as well as multilateral military conferences in Europe that bring together strategic planners or intelligence officers.

While the initial focus naturally will be on those Arab countries that already have relations with Israel, CENTCOM should invite participation by all partner nations willing to join, allowing the development of military-to-military ties even before formal political relations are established. Looking further ahead, CENTCOM should pursue possibilities for joint U.S.-Israel-Arab military operations. Relatively uncontroversial places to start might include:

- Ad hoc humanitarian missions that CENTCOM could organize to deliver assistance and provide emergency services in the wake of natural or man-made disasters in the broader Middle East region; and
- Information-sharing and interdiction operations to counter the growing number of large-scale illicit narcotics shipments in the region, many of which provide significant funding for Syria, Hezbollah, and other shared adversaries of the United

States and its Middle East partners; U.S. Southern Command's (SOUTHCOM) multinational Joint Interagency Task Force South (JIATF-S) offers a useful blueprint in these respects.

Strengthen Maritime Security in the Middle East

The Middle East is home to some of the world's most vitally important, but also conflict-prone, waterways and maritime chokepoints. Beginning as far back as 2015, and especially since 2019, Iran and its proxies have conducted repeated seaborne attacks and naval harassment that threaten equally U.S., Israeli, and Arab partner shipping and naval forces and installations. The maritime domain also has become a critical conduit for Iran's sanctions-busting and proliferation of weapons to its terrorist proxies throughout the region.⁸⁶ Thus, the area of maritime security offers ample opportunities for CENTCOM to integrate Israel into critically important U.S.-led multinational operations and task forces to uphold international norms and protect regional sea lanes that are critical to the global economy.

One area of potential low-hanging fruit could be strengthening maritime domain awareness in the waters in and around the broader Middle East. Despite Iran's and other actors' illicit use of these seaways and their growing sea-based threats to maritime critical infrastructure, U.S. and partner forces in the region struggle to share relevant information in a timely and coherent manner. Furthermore, certain U.S. allies lack the necessary intelligence, reconnaissance, and surveillance (ISR) capabilities to provide even themselves with a clear maritime threat picture. A CENTCOM-led initiative to coordinate and fuse intelligence could help overcome these barriers, while also acclimatizing America's regional partners to the benefits of closer U.S.-facilitated cooperation among themselves – including with Israel, whose appreciable ISR assets would be a particular boon in these regards. To address potential sensitivities about closer open cooperation with Israel by some Arab countries, this effort could include maritime powers from neighboring regions – such as France, Greece, and India – that work increasingly closely with America's Middle East partners on security issues.

Progress on maritime domain awareness could enable and complement forward progress on related security initiatives. This includes incorporating Israel into the Combined Maritime Forces (CMF), a 34-nation partnership based at NAVCENT headquarters in Bahrain that focuses on freedom of navigation, counterpiracy, counter narcotics, and other illicit activity by non-state actors; CMF also works to improve overall security and stability in the region more generally. In addition to European and Asian members, CMF includes Egypt, Jordan, the UAE, and Bahrain, as well as other Arab and Muslim countries lacking diplomatic relations with Israel like Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Qatar, Iraq, Malaysia, and Pakistan. Of CMF's three separate task forces focused on maritime security, Israeli participation may initially be more feasible for operations outside the Persian Gulf (Task Force 150) and counterpiracy missions (Task Force 151), and only subsequently for operations inside the Persian Gulf (Task Force 152) in immediate proximity to Iran.

Another, perhaps more challenging, opportunity is the distinct and smaller NAVCENT-led multinational maritime security platform known as the International Maritime Security Construct (IMSC), whose operational arm is Coalition Task Force Sentinel. Created in 2019 in response to a dramatic spike in Iranian attacks against commercial shipping in the Persian Gulf, Strait of Hormuz, and Gulf of Oman, IMSC's specific mission is to deter and defeat Iranian aggression against commercial shipping in these waters as well as the Gulf of Aden, Bab-el-Mandeb, and southern Red Sea. Its members include Bahrain, the UAE, and Saudi Arabia as well as the United Kingdom and several other NATO members.⁸⁷ The IMSC's small size, its Iran-focused mission, and its inclusion of Saudi Arabia all could make Israel's inclusion more controversial and difficult than with CMF. But there is little doubt that in terms of ISR activities, as well as technological capabilities, Israel has much to offer such an effort, and great national interest in doing so.

Israel's status as a world leader in developing unmanned systems could also make it a very attractive candidate to participate in NAVCENT's Task Force 59. The effort was launched in late 2021 to rapidly deploy offensive drone capabilities – including unmanned aerial, surface, and undersea platforms – for ISR, patrol, and critical infrastructure protection missions. With the aim of doubling NAVCENT's visibility across Middle Eastern waters, Task Force 59 could significantly enhance the ability of U.S. and partner forces to deter, detect, and defeat Iranian aggression and malign activities – especially with Israeli involvement.

Develop Integrated Regional Air Defense

Defending against Iran's ever-expanding, increasingly precise and lethal arsenals of missiles and drones is a shared top priority for Israel, its Arab neighbors, and U.S. forces based in the Middle East. As CENTCOM commander Gen. Frank McKenzie warned Congress in April 2021, Tehran's use and proliferation of armed drones means that, "for the first time since the Korean War, we are operating without complete air superiority."⁸⁸ Yet despite this persistent, and growing, need for an effective regional missile defense system, and despite CENTCOM advocating this concept for more than 15 years, deep distrust between Arab states in terms of intelligence-sharing has regularly stalled progress toward a genuinely integrated, U.S.-led air defense network for the Middle East. America's Arab partners have historically much preferred to work bilaterally with the U.S. military, rather than multilaterally with each other, leading to the emergence of a "hub and spoke" security architecture.

The initial successes of the Accords and Israel's subsequent move to CENTCOM create potentially valuable opportunities and incentives to break this logjam of Arab states' reluctance to build a more regionwide solution in this regard. Several Arab states express great enthusiasm for accessing Israeli air defense technology and systems such as Iron Dome, reflecting the fact that no country, including the United States, has as much experience and success as Israel in building effective layered defenses against the full range of projectile threats from Iran and its proxies.⁸⁹

Concurrently, Israel sees particular advantage in leveraging the geography of its new partners in the Gulf. Close to Iran but far from Israel, sensors and radars deployed in Arab states along Iran's immediate periphery, and the likely missile and drone flight paths from there to Israel, could appreciably enhance Israel's early warning and response capabilities against Iranian projectile threats – in some cases, Israel could gain as much as an hour of invaluable extra time to assess and address Iranian launches. Additionally, Israel sees the significant boost that would accrue to its defense industrial base by gaining dramatically expanded access to the lucrative Gulf arms market, including through potential U.S.-facilitated transfers of Israeli air defense systems. At the same time, and similar to Arab states' concerns regarding information-sharing, Israel has expressed caution over the associated technology transfer risks and the implications for its qualitative military edge over the rest of the region, which U.S. law requires the United States to uphold.⁹⁰

Some, and perhaps most, of these risks can be mitigated significantly if the United States takes the lead role in organizing such a regional effort and finding creative solutions to address Israeli and Arab needs and concerns. One possibility might be to have sensitive Israeli air defense systems operated by American troops or contractors based in Arab states. Another might see Israeli troops or contractors operating under the cover of a CENTCOM task force or other ad hoc multinational framework. While taking steps to ensure Israeli (and possibly Israeli-U.S.) technology could not make its way into China's hands, the United States also could help facilitate the development and transfer of export versions of sensitive Israeli weapons systems to its new Gulf partners in the Accords and possibly other Arab states. In fact, Israel may have fewer political and bureaucratic constraints than Washington in this regard, enabling it to deliver solutions to Arab Gulf states on a much faster timeline.

As a step on the way to genuinely integrated regional air defenses, the United States might start with an initiative to develop a common air operating picture among CENTCOM and its partner nations. Similar to the maritime domain, and despite facing shared threats from Iranian drones and missiles, U.S.-aligned countries in the Middle East tend to be stovepiped in this regard, and all too often rely on bilateral cooperation with CENTCOM instead of more genuinely multilateral efforts to develop a common threat picture. Enhanced information-sharing through CENTCOM could kickstart a broader effort to construct a viable regional early warning system. Working with Israel and Arab states, CENTCOM could seek to stand up a regionwide network that provides a much wider intelligence picture for each of the national participants, allowing them to detect and engage a far larger range of aerial threats using their existing defensive capabilities.

In any of these efforts, while the initial construct might necessarily be limited to Israel's existing peace partners in Egypt, Jordan, the UAE, and Bahrain, the participation of a much wider group of countries should be encouraged and explored – with Saudi Arabia being the most pivotal, as well as the country most immediately under daily threat from Iranian-backed projectiles. Access to Israeli air defenses would provide invaluable protection for cities, military bases, critical infrastructure, and other valu-

able economic targets across the Gulf that have been subjected to persistent drone and missile attacks, including a sharp uptick in 2021.⁹¹ In turn, marked improvements in Saudi air defense capabilities thanks to cooperation with Israel could strengthen MBS's case for moving his country more quickly and fully toward normalization.

Catalyze Regional Defense R&D Cooperation

Among their many other advantages, the Accords represent the great potential for a mutually-beneficial marriage between the enormous financial capacity of Arab countries in the Gulf and Israel's world-class defense innovation base. With U.S. leadership and support, Israel and its Accords partners could conduct cooperative R&D on important new military technologies and capabilities. Indeed, as noted above, Israel and the UAE have started doing so on their own. Abu Dhabi's state-owned company EDGE and Israel's state-owned defense contractor Israel Aerospace Industries have already concluded agreements for development of unmanned seaborne vessels as well as C-UAS capabilities.

The U.S. military has for many years benefitted from a close military technology relationship with Israel, helping to improve its ability to defend against missiles, drones, terror tunnels, and antitank threats. Washington should seek to take advantages of the new R&D synergies made possible by the Accords to promote an expanded defense-industrial partnership between the United States, Israel, and interested Arab states to address some of their most serious shared operational threats. This will require leveraging U.S. leadership and relatively small amounts of seed money, perhaps as part of an Abraham Accords Defense Partnership Act proposed above. In this regard, Congress might authorize the establishment of an Abraham Accords Defense Technology Foundation under the leadership of the Secretary of Defense and his or her Israeli and Emirati counterparts to identify, support, and promote such trilateral projects. One immediate priority could be to develop new technologies for countering the urgent threat to Israeli, Arab, and American forces posed by Iranian missiles and unmanned aerial systems, particularly through technologies like directed energy.

C. Develop a U.S. Strategy for Israel-Saudi Normalization

Given both the great potential inherent in closer Saudi strategic and diplomatic relations with Israel, and the current uncertainties in U.S.-Saudi ties, the Biden administration should prioritize addressing bilateral tensions with Riyadh and creating a firewall between strengthening defense of shared U.S.-Israeli-Saudi security interests on the one hand, and addressing lingering concerns about the Khashoggi killing on the other. These difficult decisions and tradeoffs are necessary, both to shore up America's own partnerships in the Middle East and to enable Saudi Arabia and Israel to begin taking concrete steps toward full normalization.

A first logical step would be to appoint an American ambassador to Saudi Arabia. The lack of such emissaries around the Middle East only worsens the general impression of U.S. retrenchment and indifference toward regional stability and prosperity. Ideally, the appointee would be a person of significant political or diplomatic stature in his or her own right, with an established and close relationship with President Biden and the ability to speak authoritatively to MBS on behalf of the President and Secretary of State.

In close coordination with the White House and State Department, a new ambassador should prioritize determining: 1) how far the kingdom is prepared to go in terms of peace with Israel, 2) what the process of moving toward that goal would actually look like in terms of concrete steps and initiatives, and 3) what support Riyadh would need from Washington in order to help move the process forward. In tandem, President Biden and his advisers should decide the extent to which they are willing and able to meet the conditions that MBS will seek in return for major progress on the road to normalization with Israel, and how high a price they are prepared to pay in terms of the almost certain backlash that will be triggered among influential anti-MBS and anti-Saudi elements within their own Democratic Party base. Of course, a critical part of any such discussion with MBS must include an unequivocal understanding of the unacceptability of the Khashoggi murder, the danger such horrific human rights abuses pose to the fabric of the U.S.-Saudi bilateral relationship, and the crown prince's personal commitment to ensure they are never repeated.

Should circumstances develop over time where MBS proves ready to make significant progress toward full normalization with Israel, or normalization itself, the Biden administration should be prepared to consider a menu of incentives it could offer in the realm of enhancing the U.S.-Saudi bilateral relationship to help facilitate such a historic diplomatic breakthrough, including the following:

- Reestablishing U.S. recognition of MBS's status as the kingdom's de facto ruler and President Biden's most important point of contact for conducting bilateral relations;
- Direct meetings between President Biden and MBS, perhaps first on the margins of international summits, such as the G-20, and later as part of any future presidential visits to the kingdom, but eventually also including being prepared to host MBS at a White House signing ceremony should Saudi-Israeli peace ever be in the offing;
- Removing doubt that Washington supports a stable and smooth Saudi succession from King Salman to MBS;
- Reestablishing a U.S. commitment to meet the kingdom's legitimate self-defense requirements for both offensive and defensive weapons systems; and
- Active U.S. support for MBS's ambitious program of economic reform, social liberalization, women's empowerment, and religious tolerance.

Serious constraints on both the Saudi and U.S. sides may make rapid progress toward full normalization unrealistic or unattainable at the present time. The issues are contentious, the calculations complex, and the stakes high. The best course of action may indeed be to lower U.S. sights and focus on promoting and facilitating concrete cooperative projects that advance the Saudi-Israel relationship more incrementally by addressing very specific common threats and challenges – beginning with closer cooperation on countering aerial threats from Iran and its proxies.

In light of its role as the main strategic partner of both Israel and Saudi Arabia, the United States is uniquely positioned to use its leadership, good offices, and support to broker and organize such joint efforts, particularly in sensitive military areas where complex issues surrounding technology transfers, equipment safeguards, and Israel's qualitative military edge may need to be navigated. Such initiatives could encompass seaport and airport security, maritime domain awareness, energy infrastructure resilience, and C-UAS cooperation – including deploying in Saudi Arabia proven Israeli air defense systems such as Iron Dome. Even initial progress in some of these areas could demonstrate, especially to the Saudi public, the undeniable benefits of proceeding to full normalization, while also reducing direct security burdens on the United States by enabling both Riyadh and Jerusalem to begin working together to uphold regional stability.

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