

# A Diplomatic, Military, and Economic Review for Bahrain, 12 Months into the Abraham Accords

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*The opinions and conclusions expressed herein are those of a number of international officers within the Combined Strategic Analysis Group (CSAG) and do not necessarily reflect the views of United States Central Command, nor of the nations represented within the CSAG or any other governmental agency.*

## **Key Points**

- The Middle East (ME) is a complex environment, and the Abraham Accords have complicated this environment even further.
- Israel's goals are consistent with most of the Gulf countries, including Bahrain.
- The main players in the Gulf region may believe that currently economic goals should prevail over political ambitions.
- Bahrain, despite its small geographic footprint, can be a key player in a Gulf-Sunni-Israeli alliance in the near future.
- A “pivot” away from the ME goes directly against the American national interest.
- The Abraham Accords may need some stimulus so that its impetus does not wane over time.

## **Background**

Bahrain's geographical location and geopolitical importance places the Kingdom in a prominent position. At times, Iran claims sovereignty over Bahrain and produces historical references to it. Bahrain was under Persian rule from 1602-1783, following an 80-year Portuguese occupation.<sup>1</sup> In 1799, the House of Khalifa moved to Bahrain from Qatar, and they maintained a protectorate status to the British. After the 1960s, Britain withdrew its forces from the Gulf, and Iran renewed its claims of sovereignty over the island. However, a 1970 referendum allowed the people of Bahrain to decide between independence or joining Iran. They chose independence. The Iranian Shah ceased to raise the issue, but after Iran's 1979 Islamic Revolution, Tehran put it on the agenda from time to time. Iranian officials continue to argue that until its independence, Bahrain was the 14th province of Iran and was even represented in Iran's Majlis.<sup>2</sup> These statements, which undermined Bahrain's Arab identity, independence, and sovereignty, although rare, feed the Bahraini concerns about Iran's continued subversion and repeated attempts to overthrow the monarchy.

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<sup>1</sup> Brill Consulted online, "From the Expulsion of the Portuguese from Bahrain in 1602, to the expulsion of the Persians in 1783," Sep 2015, [https://referenceworks.brillonline.com/entries/gazetteer-of-the-persian-gulf-oman-and-central-arabia-online/51-from-the-expulsion-of-the-portuguese-from-bahrain-in-1602-to-the-expulsion-of-the-persians-in-1783-COM\\_000501](https://referenceworks.brillonline.com/entries/gazetteer-of-the-persian-gulf-oman-and-central-arabia-online/51-from-the-expulsion-of-the-portuguese-from-bahrain-in-1602-to-the-expulsion-of-the-persians-in-1783-COM_000501) (accessed September 20, 2021). <sup>2</sup> Michael Segall, "Iran's Bahrain campaign enters a dangerous new phase," Sep 2020, <https://www.jns.org/irans-bahrain-campaignenters-a-dangerous-new-phase/> (accessed September 11, 2021).

Bahrain became a constitutional monarchy in 2002.<sup>2</sup> The Bahraini society is characterized by its cultural, ethnic and religious diversity. Its demographic and religious structure includes Arab and Ajam who are Sunni and Shiite Muslims, as well as Christians and Jews.<sup>3</sup> It is characterized by peaceful coexistence and community stability. Meanwhile, it is likely that Bahrain' Shi'a ruled by a Sunni leadership constitute a natural target audience for Tehran.<sup>4</sup> Previously, within the so-called Arab spring which heralded the rise of Islamist governments across the ME, Iran made several attempts to exacerbate divisions and fuel discontent in Bahrain.

### **The Abraham Accords**

On August 13, 2020, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Israel announced that they would be establishing diplomatic relations; this was followed by Bahrain and Israel on September 11, 2020. Days later, on September 15th, the three countries signed the Abraham Accords Declaration which stated their recognition of "the importance of maintaining and strengthening peace in the ME and around the world based on mutual understanding and coexistence, as well as respect for human dignity and freedom, including religious freedom."<sup>5</sup> Sudan and Morocco have also since signed the peace agreement. At the same time, but on the sidelines, these included offering to support export of sophisticated United States (US)-origin arms to the UAE, removing Sudan from the US State Sponsor of terrorism list, and recognizing Morocco's disputed claims over the Western Sahara. The US administration, however, did not make any of these substantial concessions to Bahrain. Herein, this normalization may bring into the spotlight the role and importance of KSA in articulating the scene within the Gulf region. It is perceived, to many scholars, that signing the Accords could be a pivotal moment, a hinge in history as it had an enormous impact on both internal and foreign policies of the signing countries.

According to many observers, the ME in general and the Gulf region in particular is considered an area of continuous conflict. It is a complex environment that greatly affects global trade, international adaptation for resolving conflicts in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, and the so-called Great Power Competition (GPC). The Abraham Accords complicate this environment even further. On one hand, it was initially perceived that the Accords may help to solve the Palestinian issue and support a two-state solution, though there has not been any noticeable benefit from the Accords to the Palestinians. On the other hand, it has apparently caused some of the Gulf countries and Israel to join forces against Iran. This, in turn, may exacerbate a foreseen threat to Iran's security. With that in mind, Bahrain performs an act of wisdom amidst a fanfare of a predictable US strategic shift towards the region.

### **Diplomatically, Bahrain and Israel cemented their agreement**

Bahrain's foreign policy has always been characterized by balance, deliberation, and non-interference in sovereign states' domestic affairs. Its foreign policy generally adheres to that of its closest allies in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), particularly Saudi Arabia. Bahrain is also politically close to Kuwait, in part because of historic ties

<sup>2</sup> A chronology of key events, "Bahrain profile – Timeline," Nov 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-14541322/> (accessed September 22, 2021).

<sup>3</sup> Ministry of Information Affairs, "Population and Demographics," Jun 2021, <https://www.mia.gov.bh/kingdom-of-bahrain/populationand-demographics/?lang=en> (accessed September 07, 2021).

<sup>4</sup> ARIANE M. TABATABAI, JEFFREY MARTINI, BECCA WASSER, "The Iran Threat Network, Four Models of Iran's Non-state Client Partnerships," Apr 2019, [https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research\\_reports/RR4200/RR4231/RAND\\_RR4231.pdf](https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_reports/RR4200/RR4231/RAND_RR4231.pdf) (accessed September 08, 2021).

<sup>5</sup> U.S. Department of State, "ABRAHAM ACCORDS: DECLARATION OF PEACE, COOPERATION, AND CONSTRUCTIVE DIPLOMATIC AND FRIENDLY RELATIONS," Sep 2020, [https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Bahrain\\_Israel-Agreement-signed-FINAL-15-Sept2020-508.pdf](https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Bahrain_Israel-Agreement-signed-FINAL-15-Sept2020-508.pdf) (accessed September 01, 2021).

between their two royal families. Both royal families hail from the Anizah tribe that settled in Bahrain and Kuwait. Bahrain severed diplomatic ties with Iran in 2016, going beyond a 2011-2012 cycle of tensions in which Iran and Bahrain withdrew their ambassadors. However, it has maintained good diplomatic relations with neighboring countries and a kind of special relation with KSA.

KSA is likely the leading powerhouse in the Gulf. From a religious and military perspective, as well as size, KSA is the driver behind the GCC and also, to some extent, the crisis that caused Riyadh, Abu Dhabi, and Manama to break relations with Qatar. Riyadh, so far, has stuck to the Arab Peace Initiative it supported in 2002 that envisions a two-state solution with concessions by Israel leading the way to recognition by Arab states.<sup>6</sup> Meanwhile, based on the ground laid by common historical and cultural ties, Bahrain-Turkey political relations are pursued in line with the principles of mutual interest and dialogue. Although Turkey last year strongly condemned the normalization agreement made to establish diplomatic relations between Bahrain and Israel, concurrent relations between Bahrain and Turkey, after signing the Al-Ula agreement with Qatar, are at an advanced level and cooperation is developing.<sup>7</sup>

The Al-Ula agreement, signed in Jan 2021, ended the KSA, UAE, Bahrain, and Egypt-imposed diplomatic, trade, and travel embargo on Qatar which began in mid-2017. Notably, Qatar hosts approximately 10,000 US personnel who operate out of the Combined Air Operations Center at Al Udeid Air Base, which is one of the world's most important US air bases.<sup>8</sup> The agreement has been considered as a diplomatic victory supported by Washington that paves the way towards full reconciliation in the GCC and a more united front in the Gulf region. Nonetheless, the Iranian threat may remain a major point of contention as Gulf States and Qatar navigate a way forward. With no clear policy articulated by the GCC, it is likely that Gulf States fall on the spectrum of cooperation to condemnation of Iran.

As a result of the Abraham Accords, Bahrain and Israel cemented their year-old agreement to establish diplomatic ties. Bahrain had named its ambassador to Israel in March 2021, who previously served as deputy ambassador to the US, among other senior posts in the Bahraini diplomatic service.<sup>9</sup> Further, Israel named its first ambassador to Bahrain and opened its embassy in the capital of Manama in September 2021.<sup>10</sup> The Israeli ambassador had for eight months served as temporary head of mission at the Israeli embassy in the UAE, the first Gulf state with which Israel established diplomatic relations.

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<sup>6</sup> Seth J. Frantzman, "After Bahrain, spotlight on Saudi role amid normalization deals," Sep 2020, <https://www.jpost.com/middleeast/after-bahrain-spotlight-on-saudi-role-amid-normalization-deals-642025> (accessed September 21, 2021).

<sup>7</sup> Daily Sabah, "Turkey-Bahrain cooperation is developing: King Al Khalifa," Sep 2021, <https://www.dailysabah.com/politics/diplomacy/turkey-bahrain-cooperation-is-developing-king-al-khalifa> (accessed September 15, 2021).

<sup>8</sup> Nicole Robinson, "Qatar's Normalization with Gulf States Could Pave the Way Toward a Secure and Stable Persian Gulf," Jan 2021, <https://www.heritage.org/middle-east/commentary/qatars-normalization-gulf-states-could-pave-the-way-toward-secure-and-stable> (accessed September 22, 2021).

<sup>9</sup> Dominic Dudley, "Bahrain Appoints Its First Ambassador To Israel," Mar 2021, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/dominicdudley/2021/03/30/bahrain-appoints-its-first-ambassador-to-israel/?sh=3ce4ebdb62b7> (accessed September 02, 2021).

<sup>10</sup> Al-Arabiya News, "Israel appoints first ambassador to Bahrain after normalizing relations," Sep 2021, <https://english.alarabiya.net/News/gulf/2021/09/02/Israel-appoints-first-ambassador-to-Bahrain-after-norma> (accessed September 22, 2021).

### **Militarily, Bahrain is a vital US partner on a wide range of regional security initiatives**

The kingdom has a small but well-equipped military called the Bahrain Defense Force (BDF), numbering around 13,000 personnel. Bahrain military spending/defense budget for 2019 was \$1.40 B, an 8.04% decline from 2018.<sup>11</sup> In 2020 Bahrain's military expenditures as a share of GDP was at level of 4.07%, up from 4.06% the previous year.<sup>12</sup> In terms of alliances, Bahrain participated in the Saudi-led air strikes on Houthi rebels in Yemen. It also has formal relations with NATO under a 2004 NATO-GCC "Istanbul Cooperation Initiative" (ICI). Bilaterally, the US-Bahrain security relationship dates to the end of World War II, before Bahrain's independence, and remains central to the US ability to address regional threats (Access, Bases, and Overflight).

As of early 2020, there were about 5,000 US military personnel (mostly navy) deployed in Bahrain, implementing various missions.<sup>13</sup> A current figure for US military personnel in Bahrain has not been released. Bahrain hosts the US Navy's Fifth Fleet, and its logistical and operational support enabling the US to lead both the 34-nation Combined Maritime Forces (CMF) coalition to counter piracy and terrorism, and the International Maritime Security Construct (IMSC) to support the freedom of navigation and the unrestricted flow of commerce and energy resources through the Strait of Hormuz. A significant number of US Air Force personnel also operate out of Shaykh Isa Air Base, where F-16s, F/A-18s, and P-8 surveillance aircraft are stationed.<sup>14</sup> US Patriot missile systems are also deployed to Bahrain. Moreover, the deep-water port of Khalifa bin Salman is one of the few facilities in the Gulf that can accommodate US aircraft carriers. USNAVCENT's headquarters are also based in Bahrain. Additionally, the UK opened its first overseas military base in the ME in more than four decades in Bahrain. By these advantages, US pilots flew combat missions from Bahrain in both Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) in Afghanistan, and Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF). During both operations, Bahrain also deployed its frigate warship (the Subha) to help protect US ships, and sent ground and air assets to Kuwait in support of OIF. This, in turn, clearly indicates Bahrain's strategic and geopolitical importance.

Regarding US Security Assistance and Arms Transfers, the State Department's 2021 security cooperation factsheet reports the US has provided Bahrain with \$22.5 M in Foreign Military Financing (FMF) since 2014. According to the factsheet, the assistance helps Bahrain "provide for its own defense and to operate effectively alongside US air and naval forces and has also strengthened Bahrain's interoperability for regional security and counterterrorism cooperation, boosted its maritime defenses against smuggling and terrorism, and improved its ability to deny terrorist sponsorship, support, and sanctuary in a manner that respects the human rights of its citizens."<sup>15</sup>

With respect to the US Foreign Military Sales (FMS), about 85% of Bahrain's military equipment is of US origin. Bahrain has sought to diversify its arms supplies somewhat. In 2016, Bahrain took delivery of about 250 Russianmade Kornet anti-tank systems. In 2017, Bahrain military officials stated they were in discussions to possibly purchase the Russian S-400 missile defense system, but no purchase of the system has been announced.

<sup>11</sup> Macro trends, "Bahrain Military Spending/Defense Budget 1971-2021," Jun 2021, <https://www.macrotrends.net/countries/BHR/bahrain/military-spending-defense-budget> (accessed September 27, 2021).

<sup>12</sup> Knoema, "Bahrain - Military expenditure as a share of GDP," 2020, <https://knoema.com/atlas/Bahrain/Military-expenditure-as-a-share-of-GDP> (accessed September 23, 2021).

<sup>13</sup> Heritag.com, "2021 Index of U.S. Military Strength," Nov 2020, <https://www.heritage.org/2021-index-us-military-strength/assessingthe-global-operating-environment/middle-east> (accessed September 26, 2021).

<sup>14</sup> Congressional Research Service, "Bahrain: Unrest, Security, and U.S. Policy," Apr 2021, <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/RS/95-1013> (accessed September 23, 2021).

<sup>15</sup> U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Political-Military Affairs, "U.S. Security Cooperation With Bahrain," Jun 2021, <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/RS/95-1013> (accessed September 21, 2021). <sup>17</sup> Ibid.

Particularly the S-400 could trigger US sanctions under CAATSA, but no sanctions on Bahrain under that law have been announced to date. In 2019, the State Department approved a potential sale to Bahrain of the Patriot Advanced Capability-3 (PAC-3) missile defense system with an estimated value of \$2.5 B, but the resolution did not advance. As of June 2021, the US has \$6.8 B in active government-to-government sales cases with Bahrain under the FMS system.<sup>17</sup> However, there are no reported new major sales of US arms to Bahrain as a consequence of its decision to normalize relations with Israel.

Regarding Counterterrorism Cooperation, Bahrain is assessed by US reports and officials as continuing to face a terrorist threat from Iran-backed groups.<sup>16</sup> No Islamic State or Al Qaeda terrorist attacks have been reported in Bahrain. The government, however, in 2016 has stripped the citizenship of some Bahrainis accused of supporting the Islamic State organization. Furthermore, Bahrain has hosted the secretariat of the ME and North Africa Financial Action Task Force (MENAFATF), a regional body to exchange information and recommendations to promote anti-money laundering and countering the financing of terrorism (AML/CFT).<sup>17</sup>

Thus, Bahrain is a vital US partner on a wide range of regional security initiatives. Having in mind both the US disengagement from the ME and the war in Yemen, the Gulf Arab US partners' vulnerable oil infrastructure and lack of strategic depth due to small geographic footprint, clearly shows their need to stand together against any potential aggression in a joint form. Simultaneously, Israel's formal transfer to CENTCOM's area of responsibility has taken place.<sup>18</sup> The move demonstrates a growing US confidence that the Gulf Arab states are unperturbed about being seen to make a military accommodation with Israel, in addition to political and economic engagement. It underscores the fact that the Gulf States, alongside Israel, are now the key drivers of US foreign policy in the region. It could also expand mutually beneficial cooperation region-wide, under US auspices, in terms of joint military training, exercising, and developing a regional air defense and early-warning system architecture.

### **Economically, Bahrain has the potential and is trying hard to succeed**

Bahrain, which name means "two seas", was one of the first states in the Gulf to discover oil and to build a refinery. It never reached the levels of production enjoyed by Kuwait or Saudi Arabia, and so has had to diversify its economy. The Bahraini government is a member of the World Trade Organization (WTO) and the GCC. Further, Bahrain has bilateral and economic agreements with over 40 countries, including free trade agreements (FTA) with the US (the first FTA between the US and a Gulf state), Singapore (GSFTA), the EFTA States (Iceland, Liechtenstein, Norway & Switzerland), China, France, India, and the UK. It also has duty-free access to the 17 Arab states party to the Greater Arab Free Trade Agreement (GAFTA).<sup>19</sup>

Bahrain was recognized by the World Bank as a high-income economy. Following the COVID-19 pandemic and dropping oil prices in 2020, Bahrain, which is a small and oil-dependent country, is burdened by paying back a \$6

<sup>16</sup> U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Counterterrorism, "Country Reports on Terrorism 2019: Bahrain," Feb 2020, <https://www.state.gov/reports/country-reports-on-terrorism-2019/bahrain/> (accessed September 27, 2021).

<sup>17</sup> Congressional Research Service, "Bahrain: Unrest, Security, and U.S. Policy," Apr 2021, <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/RS/95-1013> (accessed September 23, 2021).

<sup>18</sup> Sharon Wrobel, "Israel Moves Under US Central Command Responsibility, Seeking More Cooperation With Arab Neighbors Facing Iran," Sep 2021, <https://www.algemeiner.com/2021/09/02/israel-moves-under-us-central-command-responsibility-seeking-more-cooperation-with-arab-neighbors-facing-iran/> (accessed September 27, 2021).

<sup>19</sup> Department of Commerce, International Trade Administration, "Bahrain - Country Commercial Guide," Sep 2021, <https://www.algemeiner.com/2021/09/02/israel-moves-under-us-central-command-responsibility-seeking-more-cooperation-with-arab-neighbors-facing-iran/> (accessed September 22, 2021).

B aid package it received from the GCC in 2018.<sup>20</sup> Bahrain's economy contracted 2.11% in the first quarter of 2021 from a year earlier, hurt by the decline in the non-oil economy as restrictions were in place most of the quarter, government data showed.<sup>23</sup> In late May, Bahrain's central bank postponed all loan installments for individuals and companies by six months to help the economy cope with the impact of restrictions imposed to

contain the coronavirus.<sup>21</sup> Moreover, in the same month, Standard & Poor's (S&P) Global Ratings revised Bahrain's outlook to 'negative' from 'stable', citing the country's pace and ability to service its finances and external debt.<sup>22</sup> However, the government seeks to shift the country to a multi-sector orientated economy in the coming years focused on computing, tourism, and the aluminum industry. Bahrain, where Amazon Web Services launched in 2019, signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with China's giant Tencent Holdings to launch an internet data center in Bahrain by the end of 2021 in efforts to become a regional cloud computing hub, to diversify its economy and to create jobs.<sup>23</sup>

Israel expected \$220 M in non-defense trade with Bahrain in 2021. Despite political turmoil in Israel and on the backdrop of the pandemic, Bahrain and Israel have signed twelve MoUs in various fields including trade and security in the short space of a year.<sup>24</sup> It may not be the same economic pace with regards to the energetic UAE/Israeli progress, whose value of trade deals exceeded \$570 M through late August, as Bahrain has been characterized by patience and deliberation in its foreign relations throughout the decades.<sup>25</sup> Nonetheless, Bahrain and Israel are about to sign an economic cooperation agreement which will establish a joint economic committee to promote the implementation of the agreement and examine ways to remove trade barriers and increase the volume of trade between the two countries.<sup>26</sup> Herewith, business leaders and ambassadors across Israel, Bahrain, and the UAE have hailed a record year of business deals and MoUs between the three nations as they mark the first anniversary of the Accords. Furthermore, Bahrain's national carrier, Gulf air, will launch two direct flights per week to Tel Aviv, for the first time starting this October.<sup>27</sup> This, in turn, may flourish the tourism sector particularly in Bahrain as the two countries are continuing to benefit from an economic dividend following the normalization agreement.

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<sup>20</sup> Yousef Saba, Reuters, "Bahrain gets \$2 billion in bond sale after deficit spike," Jan 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-bahrainbonds/bahrain-gets-2-billion-in-bond-sale-after-deficit-spike-idUSKBN29P125> (accessed September 15, 2021). <sup>23</sup> Saeed Azhar, Reuters, "Bahrain's economy contracted 2.11% in Q1 as pandemic restrictions weigh," Jul 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/bahrain-s-economy-contracted-211-q1-pandemic-restrictions-weigh-2021-07-04/> (accessed September 15, 2021).

<sup>21</sup> Maher Chmaytelli, Reuters, "Bahrain central bank gives instructions to postpone all loan installments," May 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/bahrain-central-bank-gives-instructions-postpone-all-loan-installments-2021-05-27/> (accessed September 14, 2021).

<sup>22</sup> Nilanjana Basu, Reuters, "S&P revises Bahrain's outlook to 'negative' on continued fiscal pressures," May 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/sp-revises-bahrain-s-outlook-negative-continued-fiscal-pressures-2021-05-28/> (accessed September 14, 2021).

<sup>23</sup> Lisa Barrington, Reuters, "China's Tencent Cloud to open datacentre in Bahrain," Mar 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/article/idUSKCN2AT27D> (accessed September 19, 2021).

<sup>24</sup> Dan Williams, Reuters, "Israel expects \$220 million in non-defence trade with Bahrain in 2021," Dec 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/idUSKBN28C1SI> (accessed September 10, 2021).

<sup>25</sup> Zef Stub, "One year into Abraham Accords, Israel's trade with UAE tops \$570m," Aug 2021, <https://www.jpost.com/middle-east/oneyear-into-abraham-accords-israels-trade-with-uae-tops-570m-676181> (accessed September 10, 2021).

<sup>26</sup> Zef Stub, "Israel, Bahrain to sign economic cooperation agreement," Jul 2021, <https://www.jpost.com/middle-east/israel-bahrain-tosign-economic-cooperation-agreement-675033> (accessed September 10, 2021).

<sup>27</sup> Al-Monitor, "Bahrain's Gulf Air to start flights to Israel," Sep 2021, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2021/09/bahrain-s-gulf-airstart-flights-israel> (accessed September 27, 2021).

Regardless of the Accords, the Jews in Bahrain were prominent in business and public life as entrepreneurs, parliamentarians, and ambassadors. This September, the government reopened a fully functioning synagogue enabling Bahrain's Jews to worship in public for first time in decades.<sup>28</sup> As many more people from the Jewish faith are interested in travel to the region, dreaming up new opportunities, enthusiastic to learn from those already living in the Gulf region, those visiting will contribute to Bahrain's tourism industry and economic growth. This ideological rapprochement also gives special warmth to the Bahraini-Israeli relations.

### Assessments

Before we evaluate the rate of development in Bahraini-Israeli relations following the Accords or review its impact on Bahrain's different aspects, we should consider the context in which this development occurred.

Moreover, foreseeing the future of this context in light of the inclusion of relevant variables from the region's major stakeholders will help predicting these relations' progression curve.

To date, KSA is like the quiet calculating giant that has given its support for Bahrain and the UAE to move forward with Israel. For many reasons, numerous scholars have viewed that the most important reason for the continuing Saudi unwillingness to normalize relations with Israel is the unresolved Palestinian problem on the basis of the "two states" principle. At the same time, this principle itself is an instrument of Saudi foreign policy, thanks to which Riyadh seeks to exclude the possibility of Israeli hegemony in the future post-confrontational ME. This means, in particular, that the achievement of mutual understanding will become a reality only if the Israeli regional policy is adjusted so as not to pose a threat to Saudi interests.<sup>29</sup> Bahrain and the UAE both have different calculations. Bahrain was widely considered the country that could normalize relations first. However, its small size and Shi'ite population, as well as memories of the Arab Spring protests, illustrate that it may have been more vulnerable to threats had it made the normalization leap first.

Some may argue that ME countries traditionally have preferred to maintain bilateral relationships with the US and generally have shunned multilateral arrangements due to the lack of trust among some Arab states.<sup>30</sup> Bilateral and multilateral relations in the region, especially with the US and other Western countries, are often made more difficult by their secretive nature. Others may assume that Israel will work to strengthen bilateral cooperation of the US' Arab allies in the region, whether they are among the countries that have recently normalized relations or others, while laying clear foundations for common interests. This, in turn, demonstrates the complexity of the landscape of bilateral ties or the formation of regional alliances.

Following the end of the crisis between the Arab Quartet and Qatar in December 2020, Turkey after eight years of hostility is engaged in intensive diplomacy with Egypt, UAE, and KSA, publicly expressing interest in mending ties with these influential Arab states. Nevertheless, during the last few months, Turkey has signaled that it is also

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<sup>28</sup> France 24, "Bahrain's Jews worship in public for first time in decades," Sep 2021, <https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20210914bahrain-s-jews-worship-in-public-for-first-time-in-decades> (accessed September 28, 2021).

<sup>29</sup> Kosach G, "Saudi Arabia and Israel: The Palestinian context," Jan 2021, <https://www.mendeley.com/catalogue/cf2d0f30-87c3-30f59d8a-a9cc74eb5341/> (accessed September 02, 2021).

<sup>30</sup> Heritag.com, "2021 Index of U.S. Military Strength," Nov 2020, <https://www.heritage.org/2021-index-us-military-strength/assessingthe-global-operating-environment/middle-east> (accessed September 21, 2021).

interested in mending ties with Israel, especially in the energy sector.<sup>31</sup> However, the gaps between Turkey and Israel are still significant, and it remains to be seen whether the current geopolitical developments will also incorporate Turkey-Israel relations in the future.

Regarding a potential nuclear Iran, Israel's leaders long opposed the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), which they say has brought the region closer to nuclear war. But unlike the former administration, Israeli Prime Minister (PM) Naftali Bennett has taken a less combative approach by which Israel could accept a new nuclear deal with Iran.<sup>32</sup> On the other side, while the outcome of the last GCC summit provides a more favorable environment for the US to lay the strong foundations on which a future ME Strategic Alliance can be built, the US vision to withdraw many of its forces from the ME has raised concerns in Israel. Primarily, such withdrawal represents a step towards the region's declining importance to the Biden administration. The Israelis are interested in what this move means for Iranian influence in the region and its implications for ties with Palestinians, given the Biden administration's lack of enthusiasm for this issue.

The current US disengagement from the ME significantly changes previous strategy. During the President Trump era, it was aimed at strengthening the anti-Iranian axis in the region and consolidating the security of US' allies. He was interested in creating a new strategic balance in the ME, in line with USCENTCOM's first strategic priority, that relies on an Israeli-Gulf alliance. However, the disengagement during the President Biden era is different, especially regarding to the nuclear agreement with Iran, because the withdrawal of forces coincides with the goal of achieving a nuclear agreement without adopting any pressure on Iran as the US aims to quickly exit the region. In contrast, Israel's goals are consistent with most of the Gulf countries, including Bahrain. Against this backdrop, the new US administration's strategic foreign policy shifts undoubtedly represent, to some extent, how President Biden did not bear any electoral pledges nor even desire to run for a second term in office. President Biden's campaign slogan, "America is back," implied that diplomacy would supplant military might as the preferred mechanism of US foreign policy.<sup>33</sup> The US president's intentions might be good, but the results so far, after the so called "Afghanistan effect" - which seriously damaged US credibility in the ME - are another matter.<sup>34</sup> Thus, it is necessary to hint that even a White House keen to "pivot" away from the ME must see that this may go directly against the US national interest.<sup>35</sup>

The main players in the Gulf region, including Bahrain, may believe that economic goals should prevail over political ambitions at the present time. Future alliances in the region are expected to be based on economics in order to achieve collective security and stability in light of the possibility of America leaving the region. It can be argued, however, that in the Gulf region and its environs, there are two sorts of hypothetical interrelation already in place. The first type is based mostly on bilateral interests between its countries, the majority of which are members of the GCC, and whose political and economic objectives are likely to converge following Qatar's

<sup>31</sup> KSENIA SVETLOVA, "Will Turkey ditch Muslim Brotherhood to mend ties with Egypt and UAE?," Sep 2021, <https://www.jpost.com/international/will-turkey-ditch-muslim-brotherhood-to-mend-ties-with-egypt-and-uae-679289> (accessed September 26, 2021).

<sup>32</sup> Al-Monitor, "Gantz says Israel could accept new nuclear deal with Iran," Sep 2021, <https://www.almonitor.com/originals/2021/09/gantz-says-israel-could-accept-new-nuclear-deal-iran> (accessed September 16, 2021).

<sup>33</sup> Stephen M. Walt, "Is Biden's Foreign Policy Failing?" Sep 2021, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/09/30/is-bidens-foreign-policy-failing/> (accessed September 30, 2021).

<sup>34</sup> Michael Hirsh, "Iran Seeks to Fill a Middle East Power Vacuum" Sep 2021, [https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/09/28/iran-power-vacuum-middle-east-nuclear-power/?tpcc=recirc\\_latest062921](https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/09/28/iran-power-vacuum-middle-east-nuclear-power/?tpcc=recirc_latest062921) (accessed September 29, 2021).

<sup>35</sup> Bobby Ghosh, "After Afghanistan, Biden Shouldn't Abandon Iraq Too," Sep 2021, <https://www.bloomberg.com/opinion/articles/202109-03/after-afghanistan-biden-shouldn-t-abandon-iraq-too?srnd=opinion&oref=TP1pJeIF> (accessed September 10, 2021).

reintegration. The second is represented by the Sunni states in the region, which include the GCC members as well as Egypt and Turkey. While Bahrain shares these two debatable types, a new form of regional alliance is emerging on the horizon. Such alliance is expected to be based on economics, in which Israel is one of the most prominent players. It faces some challenges, however. The most significant of which is America's disengagement from the region, the US intransigence towards some regional countries, and lack of indications of a resolution to the Palestinian question, which serves as a psychological barrier for Arab peoples to develop this anticipated economic alliance. Importantly, the Gulf States' current rapprochement toward Iran may constitute a key impediment to this alliance as well as to improving or expanding the Abraham Accords to additional countries.

**Conclusion: "Second chances are rare; use your first chance wisely"**

Looking further back, after the initial shock has worn off, and time allows for the realization of the event and its integration into a broader picture, it is possible to gain a clearer understanding of events.<sup>36</sup> The distance demonstrates that, no matter how unexpected and remarkable the event was at the moment, life will eventually return to its normal course. The Abraham Accords were one of these events.

Bahrain is the arena of a major conflict in the Gulf between two major regional forces: Iran and the Arab regimes Bahrain supports. It is concerned about the subversion of its government, and the growing Iranian impact in the region, especially in Iraq and the Gulf. For Iran, the Bahrain campaign is not over yet. While Iran sees Bahrain as a springboard to drive its influence into Sunni territory, KSA may utilize the Bahraini-Israeli overt relations for further improvements in regional security. Perhaps Bahrain can be relied upon in this context, with no pressure on KSA to normalize relations with Israel at the present time.

The Accords are regarded as a political achievement for Israel, but it is doubtful that it has met all the objectives set for it a year ago. Further, the issue is not with the Accords themselves, but with the context in which it moves forward. The context has changed, but the goals have not. The President Trump and Prime Minister Netanyahu duo formed a special attraction for numerous countries that wanted President Trump's gifts and did not see a problem in sitting with Prime Minister Netanyahu. This dynamic has changed. President Biden believes in the importance of continuing normalization agreements and supports them but without incentives or gifts. Bennett also still raises many doubts, for some Arab leaders, due to his right-wing background and vehement views. Thus, the Abraham Accords may need some stimulus so that its impetus does not wane over time. The Abraham Accords can now be viewed as a test balloon for Arab and Islamic countries that have chosen to stay on the sidelines and postpone their decision to join in order to determine whether they can join without an open check with President Biden and without Prime Minister Netanyahu.

While the Palestinian issue may currently seem calm, and JCPOA had limited input towards the Arab Gulf USpartners, these partners must quickly determine a course of action regarding whether Israel or Iran will generate adequate strides in improving ties with key Arab Gulf countries. This, in turn, amplifies the importance of the signed Accords between Israel and both Bahrain and the UAE. The normalization of relations with Israel is yet another sign of the profound transformation reshaping the political and social landscape of the ME and redefining the region's relations with the US and Israel, particularly under Iran's shadow across the Sunni-Shi'ite and Arab-Persian divide. Further, Israel is interested in its relationship with Bahrain both in the bilateral level, but

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36 Sara Sherif, "A Year over; The Abraham Accords," Sep 2021, <https://www.dostor.org/3573846> (accessed September 23, 2021).

also as a bridge to cooperation with other countries in the region. It represents a vital example of normalization with Israel, because that relationship is linked to several intertwined issues, some of which have security and strategic dimensions of great importance to Israel. In this context, Bahrain, despite its small geographic footprint, is at the heart of all these conflicts and can be a key player in a Gulf-Sunni-Israeli alliance in a near future.

Whilst US appetite for further military engagement in the region has waned, the dynamics of competition in the diplomatic and economic arena, with reduced military capabilities and presence, will be challenging to ensure the region's security. The motivation for the Accords is a shared recognition among the partners that economic and political cooperation is imperative for a positive shared future. Also, like postwar Europe, success will likely require the US to offer technical, and sometimes political or financial support to achieve its full impact. The scope of this paper focused on examining the Abraham Accords' developments over Bahrain, in light of its regional and international variables, within a year. Future research should investigate how to evolve this significant agreement into a more effective curve for the signatories who share a common economic vision of prosperity.

**Recommendations for US / USCENTCOM:**

- Take benefit of the warmth of Bahraini-Israeli relations as a channel of communication between KSA and Israel, yet without pressuring KSA to normalize relations at the present time.
- Work with partner countries in the ME to build confidence, and work on a step-by-step basis to lead up to the eventual creation of the ME Strategic Alliance. This joint framework would allow promoting regional security and stability, while freeing up US military forces for deployment in other regions.
- Retain the commitment to a two-state solution regarding the Palestinian issue and urge Israel to take appropriate measures in this respect.
- USCENTCOM employ military diplomacy mechanisms between both Bahrain and Israel as military relationships between countries will build a foundation on which further connections are developed.
- USCENTCOM plan bi- and trilateral exercises with Bahrain and Israel on a regular basis.
- USCENTCOM invite Bahraini and Israeli officer to join CSAG at the earliest convenience.