



America Is Missing Out On Middle East Progress

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A year ago this week, Israel and the United Arab Emirates made history when they agreed to formally normalize their diplomatic relations. That breakthrough was followed by others, as Bahrain and Morocco, as well as Sudan, signed on to what has collectively come to be known as the "Abraham Accords." One year on, those connections are growing quickly, with tremendous repercussions for the region – and for the United States.

Economically, the dividends of the Accords have been undeniable. Trade between Israel and the UAE, for instance, has soared. Bilateral trade, which accounted for a paltry \$15 million just a couple of years ago, has already exceed \$500 million this year, and could top \$1 billion by the end of 2021. If it does, it would catapult the Emirates into the top tier of Israel's global trading partners.

Business with Bahrain is building, too. Late last year, Israeli officials predicted that non-defense-related trade between the two countries, until then measured in the hundreds of thousands of dollars annually, would hit \$220 million in 2021. Last month, to maintain this momentum, Israeli and Bahraini officials came to terms on a framework to fast-track trade, research & development and business exchanges.

With Morocco, meanwhile, decades of informal trade relations – sustained by the large and vibrant Moroccan diaspora now resident in Israel – have broken out into the open. The two countries recently established direct flights, and a new Israeli government report recently laid out that Israeli exports to the Kingdom (which were valued at less than \$4 million in 2019) could soon reach as much as \$250 million annually.

Political integration is progressing as well. The Emirates, Bahrain and Morocco have all appointed official envoys to Israel, and Sudan soon will. Working groups on issues such as agriculture and security have likewise been established between Israel and the governments of the Accords countries. At the societal level, meanwhile, regional tourism has flourished despite the coronavirus pandemic, as curious publics take advantage of newly-opened borders.

Strategically, too, the Accords countries are drifting into deeper alignment. A dozen years ago, mounting regional worries over the threat posed by Iran paved the way for quiet early contacts between Israel and the Gulf states. That focus has persisted. Earlier this year, Israeli Defense Minister Benny Gantz publicly aired plans to develop a "special security arrangement" with Israel's new Gulf allies to jointly counter Iran. And just this month, Bahrain's influential Derasat think tank signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the Jerusalem Institute for Strategic Studies on joint research to examine ways to counter Iran in the ideological and public diplomacy arenas.

All of these dynamics are being driven by a simple logic. Fundamentally, the reason the Abraham Accords are thriving is because the prosperity, connectivity and security they provide are in the interest to the countries that signed them.

It should be in Washington's, too. Yet the United States is now conspicuously absent from these new arrangements.

During its time in office, the Trump administration made the idea of Israeli-Arab normalization a centerpiece of its Middle East policy, and invested heavily in making such a paradigm shift a reality. The Biden administration, by contrast, has done the opposite. It has shied away from even acknowledging the Accords, let alone throwing its political or economic weight behind them. At the same time, its persistent efforts to reengage with the Iranian regime have put the United States at fundamental odds with its traditional Mideast allies on what is widely seen as the region's most important security challenge.

The consequences are liable to be profound. By failing to acknowledge the new strategic currents taking shape in the Middle East, the United States runs the risk of relegating itself to the role of bystander in them. And by not backing in the region's emerging economic and political partnerships, Washington will inevitably be eclipsed by other international actors (such as China), who are. The aggregate result is that America could soon find itself left behind in a rapidly-changing region.