



The Abraham Accords signing ceremony at the White House, September 15, 2020 (CNP/DPA/Kyodo News Images)

Chapter 2

Progress in the Normalization of Relations between the Arab Countries and Israel

The 2020 Abraham Accords and Subsequent Developments

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Summary

In 2020, relations between the Arab countries and Israel underwent changes with mediation by the U.S. Trump administration. Starting in August, four Arab countries—the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Bahrain, Sudan, and Morocco—decided to normalize relations with Israel in succession. Ever since Israel was founded in 1948, the Arab countries and Israel have fought a number of Arab-Israeli wars, and until 2020, Egypt and Jordan were the only two Arab countries that had normalized relations with Israel.

Traditionally, most Arab countries took the position that establishment of diplomatic relations with Israel would be conditioned on progress in Israeli-Palestinian negotiations and the creation of a Palestinian state. The recent normalization of relations, however, had nothing to do with the progress of the negotiations, signifying the Arab countries have departed from the traditional position.

The Arab countries that normalized relations with Israel had something to gain from the United States. Other Arab countries did not condemn the normalization of relations and may themselves decide to normalize ties with Israel. Hamas in the Gaza Strip exchanged fire with Israel in May 2021. Nevertheless, this engagement did not stem the trend of improving relations between the Arab countries and Israel.

From 2000 to 2001, Israel and Palestine held negotiations on the creation of a Palestinian state with the mediation of the U.S. Clinton administration but were unable to reach an agreement. Furthermore, in 2007, the Palestinian territories were divided into the West Bank, self-governed by the Fatah-led Palestinian National Authority, and the Gaza Strip, under the effective control of Hamas. Since then, talks between Palestine and Israel have stagnated further. Meanwhile, some Arab countries and Israel improved their relations behind the scenes in the 2010s. The lack of prospect for progress in Israeli-Palestinian negotiations on the creation of a Palestinian state, combined with some Arab countries' wish to improve relations with Israel, were behind the recent wave of normalization agreements.

Keywords

Israel Arab Palestine Middle East Abraham Accords

1. From the Founding of Israel to the Oslo Accords

The successive persecution of Jews in Europe and Russia in the latter part of the 19th century triggered Zionism, a Jewish nationalist movement to create a Jewish State. They chose to establish the new state in Palestine, where a Jewish kingdom existed in ancient times, and began immigrating there in 1882.

Palestine was placed under the British mandate after World War I. As Jewish immigration continued, clashes grew between the Jews and the original Arab inhabitants in Palestine (Palestinians). In the 1930s, Britain restricted Jewish immigration. During World War II, large numbers of Jews enlisted and fought in the British Armed Forces in order to gain military experience. Yet, even after the war, Britain continued to impose the immigration restrictions, inciting the Jews in Palestine to launch an armed struggle against the British mandatory authorities in October 1945. No longer able to contain the situation, Britain referred the matter of the future of Palestine to the United Nations (UN) in February 1947. In November, the UN adopted a resolution partitioning Palestine into two states, the Jewish State and the Arab State, with the Jerusalem area under international trusteeship.¹ The Jews accepted the resolution, but the Arabs rejected it.²

In May 1948, the British mandate ended, and the Jews declared independence of the new state of Israel. Not recognizing Israel, Egypt and other Arab states mounted a military attack on the country, triggering the First Arab-Israeli War. Conversely, the United States and the Soviet Union quickly recognized the state. Israel gradually gained the upper hand in the war after purchasing weapons from Czechoslovakia, and the war de facto ended in January 1949. Within Palestine, the Arab country of Egypt occupied the Gaza Strip, while Transjordan occupied the West Bank, including East Jerusalem. Israel acquired the rest of the land, including West Jerusalem.³ In short, Israel gained a larger area of Palestine than that allocated in the UN Partition Plan for Palestine. Many Arabs (Palestinians) fled Israel and entered the West Bank, Gaza Strip, and neighboring Arab countries as refugees.⁴ Thus originated the Palestinian refugee issue that continues to this day.

Following the subsequent Suez Crisis of 1956, or the Second Arab-Israeli War, Israel launched a preemptive attack on Egypt, Jordan, Syria, and other Arab countries in 1967 in response to Egyptian military threats, triggering the Third Arab-Israeli War. By this time, the Arab countries were supported by the East (Soviet Union) and Israel was supported by the West (United States and Europe). The Third Arab-Israeli War is also called the Six-Day War because Israel won the war in six days. In this war, Israeli forces occupied the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, the Gaza Strip, the Golan Heights in Syria, and the Sinai Peninsula in Egypt.⁵ In other words, Israel took control of the entire Palestine as well as the surrounding areas.

Until the Third Arab-Israeli War, the Arab countries appear to have aimed for the overthrow of Israel. That is to say, the survival of Israel was considered the point of contention until then. With Israel's astounding victory in the Third Arab-Israeli War, however, Israel's survival was no longer a point of contention. From then on, the true point of contention shifted to the extent of Israel's territory, i.e., where the borders should be drawn. After the war, in November 1967, UN Security Council Resolution 242 was adopted, calling for Israeli forces to withdraw from territories occupied in the war. The resolution can be construed as requiring Israel to withdraw from the West Bank and Gaza Strip in Palestine. This led to the later two-state concept of establishing a Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. In 1969, the United States became almost the sole arms supplier to Israel, and U.S.-Israeli relations have since grown even closer.

Then, in 1973, Egypt and Syria mounted a surprise attack on Israel from the north and south, causing the sudden outbreak of the Fourth Arab-Israeli War. In this war, the Arab countries were able to demonstrate their military capabilities for the first time. Egypt was thus able to claim victory in the war, and afterwards, used this as leverage to embark on peace negotiations with Israel. In 1978, Egyptian President Anwar Sadat and Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin, through the mediation of U.S. President Jimmy Carter, held negotiations at Camp David in the United States and reached an agreement. Based on this agreement, the Treaty of Peace between the Arab Republic of Egypt and the State of Israel was signed at the White House in 1979.⁶ In this way, the United States has played a mediating role in the Middle East

peace process since the 1970s.

Accordingly, Egypt became the first Arab country to normalize relations with Israel, and Israel returned the Sinai Peninsula to Egypt. With Egypt's departure from the Arab coalition, the rest of the Arab countries no longer had a chance to win against Israel. For this reason, in the wake of the Fourth Arab-Israeli War, no war has broken out involving full exchange of fire between the regular military forces of the Arab countries and Israeli forces. In protest over Egypt's unilateral signing of the peace treaty, the other Arab countries suspended Egypt's membership in the Arab League from 1979 to 1989. The peace treaty was met with opposition within Egypt as well, and President Sadat was assassinated in 1981.

In 1982, Israeli forces advanced into Lebanon with the aim of expelling the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO). The PLO was a Palestinian political organization that was based in Lebanon at the time. As a result, the PLO leadership was forced out of Lebanon and relocated to Tunisia, losing geographical contact with Palestine. Subsequently, in 1987, the Palestinian resistance movement against Israel, the intifada, was launched in the Israeli-occupied West Bank and Gaza Strip, heightening international sympathy for the Palestinians. Although the West Bank was annexed by Jordan in 1950 after the First Arab-Israeli War, Jordan relinquished sovereignty over the West Bank in 1988.

Later, in 1990, when Iraq occupied Kuwait and the Gulf Crisis broke out, Iraq advocated a linkage theory linking Israel's withdrawal from territories occupied after the 1967 Third Arab-Israeli War and Iraq's withdrawal from Kuwait. In turn, the PLO supported Iraq. In the ensuing 1991 Gulf War, U.S. and other multinational forces liberated Kuwait, and Iraq was defeated. The PLO fell short of its intention to use Iraq as leverage to defuse the situation. Meanwhile, the victorious United States stepped up diplomatic activities, creating a negotiating environment between Israel and the Palestinians.

In January 1993, Israel and the PLO began secret negotiations in Oslo through Norwegian mediation. The talks were successful. In September, Israel and the PLO mutually recognized each other and signed the Declaration of Principles on Interim Self-Government Arrangements (Oslo Accord) at the White House. Under this

agreement, it was decided that the Palestinians would govern themselves in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, that interim self-government would begin in Jericho in the West Bank and in the Gaza Strip, and that the interim period would be five years, during which the Israelis and the Palestinians would negotiate the permanent status. The matters of Jerusalem, Palestinian refugees' right to return, settlements in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, and the borders were to be discussed in the negotiations on the permanent status. The Oslo Accord thus established the policy of the two-state solution, whereby Israel would coexist with the Palestinian state, consisting of the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

Following progress in Israeli-Palestinian reconciliation, Jordan and Israel signed a peace treaty in 1994, making Jordan the second Arab country to normalize relations with Israel.

2. Stagnation of the Peace Process

Ever since these developments, however, negotiations between the Palestinians and Israelis did not make steady progress, nor did the normalization of relations between the Arab countries and Israel.

On May 4, 1994, Israel and the PLO signed an agreement in Cairo. This date marked the beginning of the five-year interim period stipulated in the Oslo Accord.⁷ In the same month, self-government began in the Gaza Strip and Jericho.

In September 1995, Israel and the PLO signed the Israeli-Palestinian Interim Agreement on the West Bank and the Gaza Strip (Oslo II).⁸ Under the agreement, the West Bank was divided into three areas: Area A, where the Palestinian National Authority has administrative and police authority; Area B, where the Palestinian National Authority has administrative authority and both Israel and the Palestinian National Authority have police authority; and Area C, where Israel has administrative and police authority. Areas A and B have a total area equivalent to around 30% of the entire West Bank. Furthermore, the agreement stipulated the withdrawal of Israeli forces from the six cities of Jenin, Tulkarm, Nablus, Qalqilya, Ramallah, and

Figure 2.1. Israel and Palestinian territories



held in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. PLO Chairman Yasser Arafat was elected in the former, and Fatah, led by PLO Chairman Arafat, won a majority of seats in the latter.

From February to March 1996, the Palestinian Islamist organization Hamas carried out suicide terrorist attacks targeting Israelis. Under its principles, Hamas does not recognize Israel's existence and rejects a peace process that is based on the Oslo Accords.

Under these circumstances, in the Israeli prime ministerial election in May 1996, incumbent Prime Minister Peres was defeated, and Benjamin Netanyahu, leader of the Likud Party against the Oslo Accords, was elected. Yet, the peace process was maintained due to the United States' exercise of influence on Israel.

Nevertheless, on May 4, 1999, the five-year interim period stipulated in the Oslo Accord elapsed without any progress in the negotiations. In the Israeli prime ministerial election on May 17, incumbent Prime Minister Netanyahu was defeated, and Ehud Barak, leader of the Labor Party, was elected.

Bethlehem in Area A and from 450 towns and villages in Area B, as well as the holding of elections after the withdrawal.

Then, in November, an advocate of the peace process, Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin of the Labor Party, was assassinated. Israeli Foreign Minister Shimon Peres of the Labor Party succeeded as prime minister and maintained the peace process. In January 1996, elections for the president of the Palestinian National Authority and elections for the Palestinian Legislative Council (the equivalent of parliament) were

Israel and the PLO continued negotiations mediated by the United States. It is thought that, at the time, the Bill Clinton administration aspired to resolve the Palestinian matter as part of its legacy. In May 2000, Israel submitted a map showing its vision of the final territory and borders of Israel and the Palestinian state. According to this map, Israel would annex the entire West Bank area bordering Jordan, and the West Bank in the Palestinian state would be divided into four non-adjacent areas that would not border Jordan and would be completely encircled by Israel. The map was far from what the Palestinians sought, and they rejected it.

Later, at the urging of the United States, Israel made a drastic concession, agreeing to make all of the Gaza Strip and around 90% of the West Bank the territory of the Palestinian state. Additionally, Israel agreed to grant symbolic rights in East Jerusalem to the Palestinian state, out of consideration for the Palestinian claim that East Jerusalem is the capital of the future state. In July 2000, a trilateral summit was held at Camp David between U.S. President Clinton, Israeli Prime Minister Barak, and PLO Chairman Arafat. The meeting ended in failure, however, with Israel and the PLO unable to reach an agreement. Although the true reason has not been disclosed, the general understanding is that negotiations broke down due to the PLO's refusal to accept the compromise proposal presented by Israel and the United States.

Negotiations continued thereafter. But, in September 2000, when Ariel Sharon, leader of the Likud Party and opponent of peace deals, visited an area in Jerusalem considered a Muslim holy site, protests were sparked by Palestinians angered by the provocation. This is known as the second intifada. A series of Palestinian-Israeli clashes caused casualties and injuries, and public opinion once again became increasingly skeptical of the peace process.

In late January 2001, Israelis and the Palestinians held negotiations in Taba, Egypt. Israel reportedly made further concessions, proposing to make approximately 95% of the West Bank the territory of the Palestinian state, as well as to cede a portion of Israeli territory to the Palestinian state as an alternative to the approximately 5% that Israel would annex. Nonetheless, the two sides were

unable to reach an agreement. The peace process lost momentum with the Clinton administration's term of office expiring in late January in the United States, while in Israel in the February prime ministerial election, Prime Minister Barak was defeated and party leader Sharon was elected. Negotiations for a final peace based on the Oslo Accords de facto ended in failure.

Subsequently, Palestinians waged a series of suicide terrorist attacks, and the Palestinian National Authority police were unable to stop them. Thus, in December 2001, Israel declared that the "Palestinian Authority is an entity that supports terrorism." It was evident Israel and the Palestinian National Authority were in a hostile relationship.

On the one hand, the Arab countries indicated they would normalize relations with Israel, in exchange for the establishment of a Palestinian state in accordance with the wishes of the Palestinians. At the Arab League summit held in Beirut in 2002, the Arab Peace Initiative was adopted. It set forth that, if Israel withdraws from occupied territories in the West Bank and Gaza Strip and establish a Palestinian state in the territories, all Arab countries would establish normal relations with Israel in return.⁹ This could have incentivized Israel, given that the security environment would improve if relations were normalized with all Arab countries which comprise the majority of Middle Eastern countries.

On the other hand, it appears Israel perceived that the breakdown in negotiations was due to the Palestinians' refusal to accept the Israeli concession, despite making the maximum concession in 2000–2001. On this basis, Israel determined that peace with Palestine would not be realized in the foreseeable future. Israel pushed for the construction of settlements and a separation wall in the West Bank, in order to establish a fait accompli so as not to be disadvantaged if a Palestinian state were established in the distant future. In 2002, Israel began construction of a separation wall in the West Bank as a security measure to protect its citizens from Palestinian terrorist attacks. Part of the wall was built, separating settlements in the West Bank from Palestinian residential areas. For this reason, it is noted that the separation wall was constructed to annex part of the West Bank into Israeli territory. In 2004, giving consideration to the Palestinians, the High Court of Israel issued a ruling

ordering the government to change the route of the separation wall that was to be constructed near Jerusalem.¹⁰

For the Gaza Strip, Israel took a different approach than it did for the West Bank. In 2005, Israeli Prime Minister Sharon implemented a unilateral withdrawal from the Gaza Strip without an agreement with the Palestinian National Authority, i.e., he dismantled settlements in the Gaza Strip. The withdrawal is attributed to Prime Minister Sharon's judgment that the Gaza Strip was of little importance. As a result, the entire Gaza Strip came under Palestinian control.

As for the Palestinian side, President of the Palestinian National Authority (and PLO Chairman) Arafat died in 2004 and was succeeded by Mahmoud Abbas of Fatah.

Although the top leadership was replaced, people in the West Bank and Gaza Strip became increasingly dissatisfied with the Fatah-led self-government's failure to deliver concrete results and with the corrupt nature of Fatah. As a result, Hamas won a majority of seats in the January 2006 Palestinian Legislative Council elections. Hamas, however, does not recognize the existence of Israel and rejects the two-state solution. Consequently, hopes began to erode for the establishment of two states through negotiations between Israel and the Palestinian National Authority.

3. The Division of Palestine and Behind-the-Scenes Developments between the Arab Countries and Israel

The Palestinian territories that are considered to comprise the future Palestinian state are divided into the West Bank and Gaza Strip, which are not geographically adjacent to each other. After the Palestinian National Authority cabinet led by Hamas was inaugurated in March 2006, Hamas established its own security force, separate from the existing security force of the Palestinian National Authority. In the Gaza Strip, where Hamas is powerful, the Hamas security force clashed with the existing security force loyal to President of the Palestinian National Authority Abbas of Fatah. In January 2007, President Abbas declared the Hamas security force illegal,

and the conflict between Fatah and Hamas intensified. In June, Hamas expelled Fatah and took effective control of the Gaza Strip. In response, President Abbas of Fatah dismissed Prime Minister Ismail Haniya of Hamas. Thereafter, the Palestinian National Authority headed by President Abbas of Fatah continued to govern the West Bank, while Hamas took effective control of the Gaza Strip, effectively splitting the Palestinian National Authority into two. Additionally, Israel tightened its blockade of the Gaza Strip.

Since 2006, when Hamas gained power in the Gaza Strip, the territory has further developed into a stronghold of Hamas and other Palestinian organizations to attack Israel. Attacks take a range of forms, including suicide terrorist attack, kidnapping of Israeli soldiers, and the firing of rockets into Israel. To deal with them, Israeli forces have conducted operations in the Gaza Strip.

For example, in June 2006, fighters from the Popular Resistance Committees, an organization formed by Fatah's opponents of the Oslo Accords, together with Hamas fighters penetrated into Israel from the southern part of the Gaza Strip via an underground tunnel, killing two Israeli soldiers and kidnapping one. Penetrating into Israel by digging an underground tunnel is a method often used by Palestinian organizations in the Gaza Strip, such as Hamas. To rescue the kidnapped soldier, Israeli forces launched Operation Summer Rains, and ground troops advanced into the Gaza Strip.¹¹

In July 2006, while Israeli forces were executing the operation in the Gaza Strip in the south, Lebanese fighters from the Shiite organization Hezbollah crossed the border into northern Israel and waged an attack, killing eight Israeli soldiers and kidnapping two. In response, Israeli forces launched Operation Change of Direction, conducting air raids on Hezbollah outposts in Lebanese territory and sending ground troops into Lebanon.¹² At this time, Palestinian organizations, such as Hamas, and Hezbollah, both supported by Iran, attacked Israel from the north and south, forcing Israeli forces to deal with two enemies simultaneously. During this roughly one-month-long operation, Israeli forces struggled against Hezbollah, losing more than 100 soldiers and failing to rescue the two kidnapped soldiers. The two died. Two years later in 2008, in a prisoner exchange with Israel, Hezbollah returned the

bodies of the two soldiers to the country. Israel released five Lebanese prisoners and repatriated them to Lebanon, and also returned numerous bodies to Lebanon, including the bodies of eight Hezbollah members.

In the Gaza Strip, Israeli forces carried out Operation Summer Rains for five months until November 2006 but failed to rescue the kidnapped soldier. Five years later, in 2011, the soldier was released, under an Israel-Hamas agreement that Israel would release 1,027 Palestinian prisoners in return for Hamas' release of the Israeli soldier. As these examples show, Israel's prisoner exchanges with Arabs, including Palestinians, have oftentimes resulted in the release of many Arabs in return for the release of a few Israelis.

Subsequently, Israeli forces conducted operations from December 2008 to January 2009 and again from July to August 2014, with ground troops advancing into the Gaza Strip.¹³

Israeli-Palestinian peace talks stagnated further. Meanwhile, the Arab countries witnessed generational changes with the passage of time. The former generation, which perpetually regarded Israel with hostility, gradually exited due to aging. In their place, the Arab countries saw the rise of a new generation not reluctant to improving relations with Israel. Among the Arab countries, this trend was pronounced in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries. In the 2010s, relations were forged behind the scenes between some Arab countries and Israel. For example, it was reported from 2014 to 2015 that aircraft were secretly flying between Israel and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and that the two countries were cooperating in the security field behind the scenes, with an Israeli-owned company responsible for protecting the critical infrastructure of Abu Dhabi. Furthermore, in 2017, an Israeli minister acknowledged behind-the-scenes contacts between Israel and Saudi Arabia.

A factor that facilitated the rapprochement between the GCC countries and Israel was the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, known as the Iran nuclear agreement, agreed to in 2015. The agreement, which eases the international community's sanctions against Iran in return for restrictions on Iran's uranium enrichment, was riddled with problems, including absence of restrictions on ballistic missiles that are the delivery means for nuclear weapons. Viewing Iran as a threat, GCC countries,

such as Saudi Arabia, and Israel opposed the agreement. The agreement, as it turned out, helped bring together the two sides sharing a common threat perception.

On the surface, most Arab countries, including the GCC countries, did not have diplomatic relations with Israel, reflecting the traditional view that Israel is an enemy or a security threat for the Arab countries. In reality, however, the security threat to the GCC countries is the same as that to Israel, which is Iran. When the civil war in Yemen on the Arabian Peninsula got fully underway in 2015, Iranian-backed Houthis took effective control of the capital, Sanaa, and began attacking Saudi Arabia and other GCC countries with ballistic missiles believed to be made in Iran. These developments appear to have further encouraged the rapprochement between the GCC countries and Israel.

Thus, the tendency to view rapprochement with Israel as a taboo gradually faded in some Arab countries. In March 2018, Saudi Arabia allowed passenger flights between Israel and a third country to pass through Saudi Arabian airspace for the first time. In October 2018, an Israeli athlete won an international judo tournament in the UAE, and the Israeli national anthem was played at the venue. At the time, Israeli Culture and Sports Minister Miri Regev accompanied the athletes to the UAE, becoming the first Israeli minister to attend a sports event in the Gulf region. Also in October 2018, it was announced that Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu visited Oman and met with Sultan Qaboos bin Said of Oman. Nevertheless, relations between the Arab countries and Israel remained informal and did not lead to the establishment of formal diplomatic relations.

4. Normalization of UAE and Other Arab Countries' Relations with Israel in 2020

In 2020, a wind of change blew through with mediation by the Donald Trump administration of the United States. At the end of January at the White House, President Trump unveiled his vision for a comprehensive peace agreement between the Israelis and the Palestinians, *Peace to Prosperity: A Vision to Improve the*

Lives of the Palestinian and Israeli People, the so-called “deal of the century.”¹⁴ This peace plan favors Israel, as indicated by the fact that, of the two parties—Israel and the Palestinian National Authority—only Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu was present at the announcement. According to the maps presented, the

Palestinian state in the West Bank would be surrounded by Israeli territory on its borders and would not border Jordan. Furthermore, the vision recognizes Israeli sovereignty over the settlements. Although the Palestinian National Authority wants East Jerusalem as the capital of the Palestinian state, all of the city of Jerusalem would be the capital of Israel under this plan. In addition, Abu Dis and other areas of the governorate of Jerusalem in the West Bank are identified as candidates for the capital of the Palestinian state. Prior to the vision’s announcement, the United States recognized Jerusalem as the capital of Israel in December 2017, moved the U.S. embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem in May 2018, and recognized Israeli sovereignty over the Golan Heights in March 2019. In November 2019, the United States announced it would not consider settlements in the West Bank as violation of international law, reversing its previous policy.

If one compares the map presented in the latest peace plan with the map of the Palestinian state purportedly presented by Israel at the end of the Clinton administration in 2001, the two have obvious differences, especially the decrease in the Palestinian state’s territory in the West Bank. For this reason, President of the Palestinian National Authority Abbas rejected the plan. While the Arab League rejected it, three of its member states, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE, responded positively to the peace plan. In other words, many Arab countries tolerated the vision.



U.S. President Donald Trump unveiling the peace plan, joined by Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, at the White House on January 28, 2020 (CNP/DPA/Kyodo News Images)

Figure 2.2. The Palestinian state proposed in the Trump administration's "deal of the century"
(*Orange sections of the map)



Source: The White House, "Peace to Prosperity: A Vision to Improve the Lives of the Palestinian and Israeli People," January 2020, 46.

Trump. Then, on September 15, Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu, UAE Minister of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation Abdullah bin Zayed, Bahrain's Foreign Minister Abdullatif Al-Zayani, and President Trump gathered at the White House, and three agreements were signed: the Israel-UAE normalization agreement, the Abraham Accords Peace Agreement: Treaty of Peace, Diplomatic Relations and Full Normalization between the United Arab Emirates and the State of Israel; the Israel-Bahrain normalization agreement, the Abraham Accords: Declaration of Peace, Cooperation, and Constructive Diplomatic and Friendly Relations; and a joint declaration of the four countries, the Abraham Accords Declaration.¹⁵ Arabs and Jews have long fought in the Arab-Israeli wars. Nevertheless, the agreements mention Arabs and Jews being descended from a common ancestor, Abraham.

At this point, differences in position were becoming apparent between these Arab countries and the Palestinian National Authority.

Beginning in August 2020, four Arab countries decided to normalize relations with Israel in succession. First, on August 13, U.S. President Trump, Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu, and Deputy Supreme Commander of the UAE Armed Forces and the Crown Prince of the Emirate of Abu Dhabi Muhammad bin Zayed issued a joint statement, the Abraham Accords, announcing that the UAE and Israel agreed to normalize relations. This was followed on September 11 by the announcement that Bahrain and Israel agreed to normalize relations through the mediation of President

Abraham is a common ancestor of the founders of the Judaism, Christianity, and Islam religions, and the agreements call for the coexistence of their respective followers in the Middle East.

Furthermore, on October 23, it was announced that Sudan and Israel agreed to normalize relations through the mediation of President Trump.¹⁶ At a later date, Sudan signed the Abraham Accords Declaration.¹⁷

Additionally, on December 10, it was announced that Morocco and Israel agreed to normalize relations through the mediation of President Trump. On December 22, an Israeli delegation led by National Security Adviser Meir Ben-Shabbat and U.S. White House Senior Adviser Jared Kushner visited the Moroccan capital, Rabat, and held a meeting with King of Morocco Muhammad VI. The three countries signed a joint declaration regarding the normalization of Morocco-Israel relations. Among the Arab countries, Morocco is considered to have had relatively good relations with Israel. Even before the agreement to normalize relations, Morocco and Israel had established liaison offices in each other's countries from 1994 to 2000, and in 2003, Israeli Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Silvan Shalom visited Morocco. In February 2020, the Moroccan forces reportedly acquired Israeli-made reconnaissance drones via a third country.

In this way, four Arab countries agreed to normalize relations with Israel in a short period of time. This achievement is a legacy left by mediator President Trump. The Arab countries that agreed to normalization received something in return from the United States. The UAE is expected to be able to purchase F-35 fighters from the United States. Israel, with F-35 fighters in its inventory, seeks to maintain military superiority in the region and was opposed to the acquisition of F-35 fighters by GCC countries with which it had no diplomatic relations, including the UAE. Yet, in October 2020, following the UAE-Israel normalization agreement, the United States and Israel agreed that the former would increase the military capabilities of Israel, which would allow it to maintain military superiority. Based on this agreement, Israel announced it would not oppose the U.S. sale of F-35 fighters to the UAE. In December 2021, however, Abu Dhabi reportedly informed the United States that it would suspend talks with the country to purchase F-35 fighters. The UAE, which

Figure 2.3. The Middle East



uses Chinese company Huawei's 5G communications network, was asked by the United States to take preventative measures so that F-35 fighter and other sensitive information is not leaked to China. The UAE's reluctance to comply is believed to be behind the suspension of the talks.

What Sudan received in return was its removal from the U.S. list of state sponsors of terrorism. In 1993, following a terrorist attack on the World Trade Center (later destroyed in the 9/11 attacks in 2001), the United States designated Sudan as a state sponsor of terrorism on the grounds that Sudan's Omar al-Bashir regime was harboring al Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden and others. Even after the al-Bashir regime fell in 2019, Sudan was not removed from the list of state sponsors of terrorism. But, on October 23, 2020, the date the Sudan-Israel normalization agreement was announced, President Trump signed an executive order to remove Sudan from the list, as it had completed payment of \$335 million in reparations to victims of terrorist attacks, including the 1998 al Qaeda terrorist attacks on the U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania, and to their families. In December 2020, the United States removed Sudan from the list of state sponsors of terrorism. Following the removal, Middle East countries on the U.S. list are Syria and Iran.¹⁸

Morocco received U.S. recognition of its sovereignty over the Western Sahara. When the Morocco-Israel normalization agreement was announced on December 10, 2020, President Trump announced U.S. recognition of Moroccan sovereignty over

the Western Sahara, as well as an intention to open a consulate in the region.¹⁹ The establishment of a consulate in the Western Sahara as an outpost of the U.S. Embassy in Morocco indicates the United States considers the region as Moroccan territory.

Morocco claims territorial rights over the Western Sahara, a former Spanish colony, while locally, the Polisario Front has been campaigning for its independence. The Polisario Front, which receives support from Morocco's neighbor Algeria, declared the establishment of the "Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic" in 1976, and its government-in-exile is located in Algeria. Although the Polisario Front only controls part of the Western Sahara, the "Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic" is recognized as a state by many African and Latin American countries and is a full member of the African Union. In addition, the UN and many Western countries adopt the position that the issues surrounding the Western Sahara should be resolved through a referendum.

In contrast, the December 22, 2020 Joint Declaration of Morocco, the United States, and Israel states, "The United States...reaffirms its support for Morocco's serious, credible, and realistic autonomy proposal as the only basis for a just and lasting solution to the dispute over the Western Sahara territory," i.e., the U.S. position that the Western Sahara matter is a matter of Moroccan domestic autonomy and not a matter of secession and independence.²⁰ Furthermore, the United States approved a new map that includes the Western Sahara as Moroccan territory. In such manner, Morocco gained the backing of the United States. Meanwhile, the Polisario Front and Algeria condemned the United States, and Algeria severed relations with Morocco in the following year, 2021.

A ceasefire between Morocco and the Polisario Front took effect in 1991 and lasted for 29 years until 2020. In November 2020, just before the United States recognized Moroccan sovereignty over the Western Sahara, Moroccan forces expelled Polisario Front supporters in the Western Sahara who were blocking a road leading to neighboring Mauritania. The Polisario Front then declared an end to the ceasefire. The UAE and Bahrain, which agreed to normalize relations with Israel before Morocco, subsequently opened consulates in the Western Sahara in succession. This measure was likely aimed at showing recognition of Morocco's

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sovereignty over the Western Sahara, and thereby, encouraging Morocco to agree to normalize relations with Israel. On November 4, 2020, the UAE opened a consulate in the Western Sahara, becoming the first Arab country to do so. In late November, it was reported that Bahrain decided to open a consulate in the Western Sahara, and the consulate was opened on December 14, following the December 10 agreement between Morocco and Israel to normalize relations.

The wave of normalization agreements in 2020 had nothing to do with the progress of the Israeli-Palestinian peace talks. This signifies that the UAE and other Arab countries have departed from their traditional position, i.e., linking progress in the Israeli-Palestinian peace talks with the normalization of relations between Israel and Arab countries. Moreover, the series of normalization of relations were essentially not condemned by other Arab countries. Rather, in September 2020, soon after the UAE-Israel normalization agreement, Saudi Arabia allowed all aircraft traveling to and from the UAE to pass through its airspace. This was, in effect, airspace clearance for aircraft flying between Israel and the UAE. In short, Saudi Arabia sought to accommodate the UAE which had normalized relations with Israel. What this implies is that Arab countries, which do not have diplomatic relations with Israel yet, perceived the following: Arab countries may normalize relations with Israel, regardless of the progress of the Israeli-Palestinian peace talks. Back when Egypt normalized relations with Israel, it was boycotted by Arab countries, and domestically, its president was assassinated. In contrast, the countries that normalized relations with Israel in 2020 have not been disadvantaged and have benefitted primarily. It is thus possible that other Arab countries may decide to normalize relations with Israel in the future. In November 2020, Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu reportedly made a secret visit to Neom, Saudi Arabia and met with Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman and U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo. GCC countries in particular are deepening their ties with Israel—both formal diplomatic relations and informal behind-the-scenes relations.

In January 2021, President of the Palestinian National Authority Abbas announced that Palestinian Legislative Council elections would be held in May and Palestinian National Authority presidential elections at the end of July. Last held in 2005 and 2006, respectively, presidential and Legislative Council elections had not been held for many years due to the 2007 civil war. However, at the end of April 2021, President Abbas postponed both elections indefinitely. At the time, President Abbas-led Fatah was anticipated to run in the Legislative Council elections by splitting into three groups due to internal divisions. Fatah would have had a high chance of losing the elections to Hamas, and this is deemed the reason for the postponement. The postponement was therefore criticized by Hamas.

Meanwhile, from April to early May, Palestinian residents in the neighborhood of Sheikh Jarrah and Palestinians supporting them clashed with settlers and Israeli police in East Jerusalem over the Israeli authorities' eviction order against Palestinian residents. On May 7, Palestinians who had gathered for prayers at the Al-Aqsa mosque compound, considered a Muslim holy site in Jerusalem's Old City, clashed with Israeli police, and over 200 people were injured. In response to this situation, Hamas demanded that Israeli security forces withdraw from the Al-Aqsa mosque compound and the neighborhood of Sheikh Jarrah by 6 p.m. on May 10, and declared that it would wage attacks if they did not comply. On May 10, soon after the deadline unilaterally designated by Hamas expired, Hamas and the Islamist organization Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ), which receives support from Iran like Hamas, fired numerous rockets from the Gaza Strip into Jerusalem and Ashkelon in southern Israel. In response, on the same day, Israeli forces launched Operation Guardian of the Walls and conducted air raids on the Gaza Strip.²¹ Israeli forces intercepted many of the rockets with the Iron Dome air defense system, but some landed in Israel, partly due to Hamas' saturation attacks.

From May 11, Hamas and the Islamic Jihad expanded the scope of their attacks and fired rockets into central Israel, including Tel Aviv. On May 12, Saudi Arabia's

King Salman bin Abdulaziz expressed support for the Palestinians and condemned Israel. On May 14, ground troops of Israeli forces began shelling the Gaza Strip. In this conflict, however, the ground troops did not advance into the Gaza Strip. Advancing ground troops offers the advantage of destroying targets more reliably. Yet, it also has the disadvantage of creating more casualties and injured people among its own troops, as well as more abductees and civilian casualties. Hamas has built an extensive network of underground tunnels in the Gaza Strip, many of which have been destroyed by Israeli forces through airstrikes and artillery fire. On May 15, upon giving warning, Israeli forces launched an airstrike and destroyed a building in the Gaza Strip occupied by the Associated Press and Al Jazeera. According to Israeli forces, the building was believed to have housed a Hamas military outpost.

In this conflict, it appears that the objective of Israeli forces was to destroy the military facilities and weapons caches of Hamas, neutralize its fighters, and reduce its military capability. Hamas strengthens its military capability by stockpiling and developing weapons, such as rockets, requiring Israeli forces to destroy and weaken them every few years to decrease the threat to Israel. Meanwhile, it appears that the objective of Hamas was to bolster its presence as a challenger to Israel and to maintain effective control of the Gaza Strip. Thus, it was possible for both Israeli forces and Hamas to achieve their objectives simultaneously, leading both to later declare victory.

On May 19, U.S. President Joseph Biden held a telephone talk with Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu and urged Israel to deescalate tensions. Israel and Hamas do not recognize each other and have no channels for direct dialogue. Therefore, Egypt, having ties to both, mediated the ceasefire. Perhaps because Israeli forces had largely achieved their operational objectives, Israel and Hamas agreed to a ceasefire, which took effect on May 21. Both Israel and Hamas declared themselves victorious. During the 11-day conflict, Hamas and the Islamic Jihad fired approximately 4,400 rockets, reportedly killing 13 people in Israel, including civilians, and more than 200 people in the Gaza Strip, including civilians. At the time of the conflict, a niece of Hamas Political Bureau Chief Haniya, the highest-ranking Hamas official, was reportedly hospitalized in an Israeli hospital. This was seemingly a humanitarian

measure taken by Israel.

Although the ceasefire went into effect, there was no change in the confrontational relationship between Hamas and Israel. After the ceasefire took effect, Palestinian organizations such as Hamas launched incendiary balloons from the Gaza Strip toward Israel, causing a series of fires in southern Israel. For this reason, Israeli forces staged multiple air strikes on the Gaza Strip from mid-June.

The recent conflict in the Gaza Strip did not stem the trend of improving relations between the Arab countries and Israel. This is evidenced by their enhanced relations since then, as elaborated below. On June 29, Israeli Foreign Minister Yair Lapid became the first Israeli foreign minister to pay an official visit to the UAE and attended the opening ceremony of the Israeli embassy in Abu Dhabi. Following this, on July 14, the UAE opened an embassy in Israel in Tel Aviv. The opening ceremony was attended by Israeli President Isaac Herzog. The attendance by the president, who is the son of former Israeli President Chaim Herzog, author of *The Arab-Israeli Wars: War and Peace in the Middle East*, a fundamental book on the Arab-Israeli wars, epitomizes the improvement of relations between the Arab countries and Israel.

On July 4, a Moroccan Air Force aircraft landed at an Israeli airport, probably to participate in a multinational exercise of the Israeli Air Force. On July 25, two Israeli airlines, including EL AL, commenced direct flights between Israel and Morocco. Furthermore, in mid-August, Israeli Foreign Minister Lapid visited Rabat to meet with Moroccan Minister of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation Nasser Bourita and attended the opening ceremony of the Israeli liaison office.

At the Tokyo Olympic Games held from July to August, Algerian and Sudanese athletes abstained from the judo event to avoid competing against Israeli athletes. While Algeria does not have diplomatic relations with Israel, Sudan agreed to normalize relations with Israel in the previous year. In Sudan, however, there is strong public opinion against normalizing relations with Israel, which is thought to have led to the abstention. On September 17, U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken hosted an online meeting on the first anniversary of the signing of the Abraham Accords. Israel, the UAE, Bahrain, and Morocco participated but Sudan did not.

On September 30, Israeli Foreign Minister Lapid visited Bahrain for the first

time. He met with Bahrain's King Hamad bin Isa and attended the opening ceremony of the Israeli embassy. Also on September 30, Bahraini airline Gulf Air began passenger flights between Bahrain and Israel. On October 1, Expo 2020 Dubai kicked off in the UAE, and Israel participated in the Expo by opening a pavilion.

On October 3, EgyptAir began operating passenger flights between Cairo and Tel Aviv. Previously, passenger flights were formally operated by its subsidiary Air Sinai in order to keep the Egypt-Israel relationship discreet. It is believed that the operation of passenger flights switched to the parent company because relations improved between other Arab countries and Israel, making it no longer necessary to conceal the passenger flights. On December 12, Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett became the first Israeli prime minister to pay an official visit to the UAE, and on the following day, December 13, met with Deputy Supreme Commander of the UAE Armed Forces and the Crown Prince of the Emirate of Abu Dhabi Muhammad bin Zayed.

In this way, the 2020 emerging trend of improved relations between the Arab countries and Israel, independent of the progress of Israeli-Palestinian peace talks, continued in 2021 despite the outbreak of the Gaza Strip conflict. This trend is expected to continue for the foreseeable future.

NOTES

- 1) Martin Gilbert, *The Routledge Atlas of the Arab-Israeli Conflict* (London: Routledge, 2005) 8th edition, 36.
- 2) Chaim Herzog, Shlomo Gazit, Michael Herzog et al., *The Arab-Israeli Wars: War and Peace in the Middle East from the 1948 War of Independence to the Present* (London: Greenhill Books, 2005), 14.
- 3) Gilbert, *The Routledge Atlas of the Arab-Israeli Conflict*, 46.
- 4) Ibid., 47.
- 5) Ibid., 68.
- 6) Treaty of Peace between the Arab Republic of Egypt and the State of Israel, March 26, 1979.
- 7) Agreement on the Gaza Strip and the Jericho Area, May 4, 1994.
- 8) Israeli-Palestinian Interim Agreement on the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, September 28, 1995.
- 9) "Beirut Declaration on Saudi Peace Initiative," March 28, 2002.

- 10) Gilbert, *The Routledge Atlas of the Arab-Israeli Conflict*, 157.
- 11) [Israel] Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), "Kerem Shalom Attack and Kidnapping of Cpl. Gilad Shalit" (June 25, 2006); [Israel] Defense Forces Press Center, "Operation Summer Rains" (2006).
- 12) [Israel] MFA, "The Second Lebanon War" (July 12, 2006).
- 13) [Israel] Defense Forces Press Center, "Operation Cast Lead" (2009); [Israel] Defense Forces Press Center, "Operation Protective Edge" (2014).
- 14) The White House, "Peace to Prosperity: A Vision to Improve the Lives of the Palestinian and Israeli People" (January, 2020).
- 15) Abraham Accords Peace Agreement: Treaty of Peace, Diplomatic Relations and Full Normalization between the United Arab Emirates and the State of Israel, September 15, 2020; Abraham Accords: Declaration of Peace, Cooperation, and Constructive Diplomatic and Friendly Relations by the State of Israel and the Kingdom of Bahrain, September 15, 2020; The Abraham Accords Declaration, September 15, 2020.
- 16) The White House, "President Donald J. Trump Brokers a Historic Peace Agreement between Israel and Sudan" (October 23, 2020).
- 17) The Abraham Accords Declaration, January 6, 2021.
- 18) [U.S.] Department of State, "State Sponsors of Terrorism" (2021).
- 19) The White House, "President Donald J. Trump Has Brokered Peace between Israel and the Kingdom of Morocco" (December 11, 2020).
- 20) U.S. Embassy & Consulates in Morocco, "Joint Declaration" (December 22, 2020).
- 21) [Israel] Defense Forces Press Center, "Operation Guardian of the Walls" (May 2021).