

Leveraging the Abraham Accords for Israel's Relations with Europe

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In 2020, European decision and opinion makers generally dismissed the Abraham Accords as a diversion from the Palestinian issue. Two years later, after the outbreak of the Ukraine War and the advance of Iran's nuclear program, more Europeans realize the potential contribution of those accords to energy and food security and European interests in Africa.

This geopolitical change offers Israel an opportunity to advance trilateral partnerships with Europe and with the signatories of the Abraham Accords. The normalization agreements signed between Israel, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and Bahrain in August

2020 (The Abraham Accords), and subsequently between Israel and Morocco in December 2020, have formalized intelligence and economic ties that had previously existed discretely.

Official relations, however, have enabled business partnerships, academic cooperation, direct investments, and tourism. Fruitful synergies can emerge from those accords thanks to Israel's technological edge, the financial resources of the UAE and Bahrain, and Morocco's status as having the world's most extensive reservoir of phosphates – the most widely used source of fertilizer.

Yet despite the actual and potential contribution of the agreements to energy and food security, the Abraham Accords have generally been dismissed by European opinion makers as a gimmick staged by former U.S. President Donald Trump for his 2020 presidential campaign and as a diversion from the Palestinian issue. With the war in Uk

however, some European diplomats and think tanks have started noticing the potential of the Abraham Accords for Europe's security and energy needs.

A German diplomat, for example, has written that only recently "did the opportunities of normalization become clearer, leading to the idea of 'project-based trilateral cooperation' between Israel, the 'normalizers,' and the EU." Indeed, the EU could benefit from promoting its climate agenda by diversifying its energy sources.

The Abraham Accords can be leveraged to upgrade relations between Israel and Europe. This paper explains the new geopolitical realignment and proposes two areas of trilateral cooperation between Europe, Israel, and the Arab signatories of the accords: security and economic cooperation in Africa; and joint projects for improving energy and food security.

Geopolitical Realignment

The advancement of Iran's nuclear program and the war in Ukraine have coalesced geopolitical divides in the Middle East and North African region. Iran has bypassed U.S. sanctions thanks to its economic ties with China and Russia. The visits of U.S. President Joe Biden to Israel and Saudi Arabia and of Russian President Vladimir Putin to Iran in July 2022 symbolized and confirmed the Middle East's two competing axes: the U.S.-backed axis of Israel and moderate Sunni states and the Russia-backed one of Iran and its proxies.

While Israel had initially tried to keep a low profile on Russia's war against Ukraine not to undermine Israel's freedom of action in Syrian

airspace, neutrality is no longer an option. America's expectation from its allies to stand with it and the conflicting interests between Israel and Russia can no longer be ignored. Putin's increased support for Iran, the legal proceedings against the Jewish Agency in Russia, and his hostility to alternative gas supplies for the EU created a larger gap in the positions between Moscow and Jerusalem. Hence Russia has become a threat to the EU and arguably to Israel.

One also witnesses a realignment in the Mediterranean due to common energy interests and the revisionist foreign policy of Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. In recent years, relations between Turkey and Israel have deteriorated. In contrast, Israel and Greece have developed a military and an energy partnership with Cyprus, while Turkey became an adversary, notwithstanding Erdoğan's recent attempt to mend fences with Israel. Erdoğan's support for the Muslim Brotherhood and his claims to exclusive economic rights in the Mediterranean, which could undermine gas exports to Europe, has led to better relations between Israel, the EU, and the UAE.

France and Italy have increased their naval presence in the eastern Mediterranean to deter Turkey. The UAE and Israel have upgraded their intelligence cooperation against Turkey and Qatar (the UAE strongly opposes the Muslim Brotherhood, which enjoys the support of both Turkey and Qatar). Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi toppled the Muslim Brotherhood in 2013 and has joined the East Mediterranean Gas Forum, which includes Israel, Greece, Cyprus, France, Italy, Jordan, and the

Palestinian Authority. The Abraham Accords offer an opportunity to expand and formalize defense cooperation in the eastern Mediterranean between Israel, the UAE, Egypt, Greece, Cyprus, France, and Italy.

The progress of Iran's nuclear program has transformed the Islamic republic into a threshold country, thus acquiring the capacity to build nuclear weapons quickly. This new reality threatens Israel, the UAE, and Europe. Iran shares with the UAE the shores of the Hormuz Strait. A nuclear Iran would likely increase its support for Shi'ite militias throughout the Middle East – such as the Houthis in Yemen and Hezbollah in Lebanon – and threaten to disrupt shipping in the Straits of Hormuz and Bab-el-Mandeb with little fear of retaliation.

Iran's long-range missiles can reach Europe. And Iran undermines European interests – especially French interests – in North Africa and sub-Saharan Africa. Iran's status as a threshold nuclear state increases the potential for trilateral cooperation between Israel, Europe, and the UAE.

Cooperation in Africa

The renewal of relations between Israel and Morocco (the two countries had diplomatic relations between 1994 and 2002) was facilitated by the decision of the Trump administration to recognize Morocco's sovereignty over Western Sahara, a disputed territory whose legal status is similar to that of the West Bank (neither territory was recognized as a sovereign country, or as part of a sovereign country, before its seizure by Israel in 1967, and by Morocco in 1975).

Morocco values its security cooperation with Israel to combat the Polisario Front in Western Sahara and jihadists in neighboring Mauritania. In 2018, Morocco severed diplomatic relations with Iran because the Islamic Republic supported the Polisario Front. Morocco accused Iran of smuggling weapons from Hezbollah via Algeria to the Polisario Front.

Iran's support for the Polisario Front was one reason for the security cooperation between Israel and Morocco. The Abraham Accords offer an opportunity to coordinate security cooperation between Israel, Morocco, and France against Iranian and Russian involvement on the African continent. Shortly after his election in August 2011, Iran's president Ebrahim Raisi declared that Iran would prioritize its relations with Africa. Former President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad initiated Iran's Africa policy (2005-13). This policy involves investing in African states' infrastructure and trying to undermine Africa's ties with the US, Saudi Arabia, and Israel.

Iran can also count on the political and economic clout of the Shia Lebanese diaspora throughout the continent. Under Ahmadinejad, Iran took advantage of skyrocketing oil prices and became a central economic actor in sub-Saharan Africa. However, the economic sanctions imposed by the Obama and Trump administrations weakened Iran's financial capabilities to benefit Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Israel.

Hence Iran decided to invest in knowledge-based companies (known as *Danesh Bonyan*) in Africa to circumvent economic sanctions (these companies are officially not related to the energy and finance industries). Such

companies now operate in Kenya, Uganda, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Nigeria, Senegal, Tanzania, and Ghana. They compete with Saudi, Turkish, and Israeli companies active in Africa.

During his visit to West Africa in July 2022, French President Emmanuel Macron denounced “Russian imperialism and neo-colonialism” on the continent. His ire was directed at Putin’s militia – the Wagner Group – replacing French troops in the Central African Republic and Mali.

As a sought-after military and security actor throughout Africa, Israel can be a valuable partner for France’s effort to counter Russian inroads on the continent by upgrading Israeli military contracts with African governments. Unlike Russia, Israel is not suspected of imperialism or neo-colonialism by African governments.

Israel can also benefit from Morocco’s economic clout in Africa. Under King Mohammed VI, Morocco has become a major source of direct foreign investment and economic cooperation throughout Africa. In the past fifteen years, Morocco has become the world’s largest investor in West Africa and the second largest in all of Africa.

Those investments cover telecoms, banking, construction, mining, and agriculture. They compete with Iran’s economic influence in Africa – itself wielded via foreign direct investment and the Shia Lebanese diaspora business network throughout Africa. Official ties between Morocco and Israel provide an opportunity to coordinate a common policy of countering Iran’s economic inroads in Africa.

The upgrading of security cooperation between Israel and Morocco was confirmed by the official visit of Israel’s Chief of Staff to Morocco in July 2022 and of Morocco’s Chief of Staff to Israel in September 2022. In August 2022, King Mohammed VI called upon Morocco’s allies to recognize its sovereignty over Western Sahara. While the United States and Israel have done so, and Spain and Germany now say they would support Sahrawi autonomy under Moroccan sovereignty, France still refuses to recognize Morocco’s sovereignty over Western Sahara.

The official visit of Macron to Algeria in August 2022 was perceived by Morocco as a provocation, given Algeria’s support for the Polisario Front. Behind closed doors, Moroccan officials say they do not intend to let France get away with its unfriendly policy and are eager to grant contracts to other countries, first and foremost Israel.

Energy and Food Security

The European Commission’s President, Ursula van der Leyen, came to Israel in June to sign a natural gas agreement and has turned Israel into a partner for reducing the EU’s dependence on Russian gas. The Abraham Accords countries constitute a significant energy hub critical to Europe’s energy security. The war in Ukraine precipitated a hike in oil prices and undermined Russia’s reliability as a natural gas supplier.

This energy hub has three components: Israel’s natural gas resources and Israel’s technological edge (which is critical to increase the reliability and reduce the cost of renewable energy alternative fuels); the UAE’s significant o

production (three million barrels per day); and Morocco's leadership in renewable energies, especially solar energy (Morocco has invested heavily in major solar energy projects, and it is the only African country to have a power cable link to Europe).

Grain supply has been impacted by the conflict in Ukraine, increasing food costs. Israel and Morocco possess resources that can combat the food crisis: Morocco contains 75% of the world's phosphate reserves used as fertilizer and is the world's largest producer of phosphates; Israel has made technological advancements to agricultural productivity and water management. Morocco's state-owned phosphates and fertilizers producer OCP Group has subsidiaries in twelve African countries and is Africa's number one supplier of phosphates. It has contributed to increasing grain yields throughout the continent.

Improving food security is an African and European interest, as food scarcity constitutes a key incentive to illegal immigration from Africa to Europe. Morocco and Israel should promote joint agricultural projects in sub-Saharan Africa under the dual aegis of Israel's Mashav agency and Morocco's Agency for International Cooperation (AMCI).

Behind closed doors, Emirati and Bahraini diplomats express their eagerness to advance development projects in the West Bank to convince public opinion at home and throughout the Arab world that the Abraham Accords can contribute to the economic well-being of the Palestinians.

While the UAE and Bahrain normalized their relations with Israel because of their national interest, they do not wish to be accused of ignoring the Palestinians. Hence, they are eager to showcase economic projects indicating that the Abraham Accords are congruent with improving Palestinian livelihood. Such projects should focus on energy and food security and can be jointly promoted and funded by the EU and European governments.

German chancellor Olaf Scholtz has described the Ukraine war as a *Zeitenwende*, or historic turning point. Contrary to Putin's assumptions, the Ukrainians are willing to fight and die for their freedom and national legacy, and the West has been resilient and united. Yet the war in Ukraine has also produced a global energy and food crisis, particularly acute in Europe due to the continent's dependency on Russian gas.

Because of Europe's need to secure energy and food supplies and growing Iranian and Russian involvement in Africa, the Abraham Accords countries can become valuable partners for Europe thanks to their respective and collective assets.

While the Abraham Accords were initially dismissed in Europe as insignificant, they are now perceived as an opportunity to help Europe face its economic and geopolitical challenges. Hence there is an opportunity for Israel to leverage the Abraham Accords by upgrading its relations with Europe.

Doing so requires a proactive policy based on three pillars: a. Identify areas of common interests between Israel, the EU, Morocco

the Gulf states; b. Build a platform (similar to Start-Up Central, which brings together international investors and Israeli technology) between the businesses, government officials, and academics of the relevant countries; c.

Build Abraham Accords caucuses in European parliaments and their counterparts in Israel, the Gulf states, and Morocco.

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