

## THE EU AND THE ABRAHAM ACCORDS: FROM SCEPTICISM TO ENGAGEMENT

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**Abstract:** *The Abraham accords signed in Washington in September 2020, a series of joint normalization statements between Israel the UAE and Bahrain followed by Morocco in December 2020, were a game changer in the Middle East. Those Accords provide the pathway to the end of the Arab Israeli conflict and a future of peace, tolerance and opportunity in the Middle East and around the world. Those accords proved that there is a new way for negotiations in the Middle East. One could have been surprised that the EU was not engaged in the Accords when signed. The fact that Europeans believe in the two-state solution as the only solution and the fact that the American President Donald Trump was behind the Accords made Europe skeptical to the Accords. But reality made the difference: The war in Ukraine brought its challenges and Iran's interference in the conflict (supplying drones to Russian's army) provoked a real concern in Europe. The Iranian nuclear program seemed again a threat to the west and not only to Israel and Gulf countries. conflict management played a role. This paper depicts how Europe went from skepticism to engagement concerning the Abraham Accords. Geo-political interests were clear: geopolitical realignment, a great potential for Africa and energy and food supply potential in connection to those Accords. Furthermore, cooperation as well as development in foreign affairs played a role in Europeans' choice.*

**Keywords:** *Abraham Accords, Israeli-Arab conflict, cooperation, international relations*

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## **Introduction**

Geopolitics is an essential factor in international affairs. Hence in order to understand our study one cannot detach it from regional changes occurring in the region. And that is exactly what has happened in the Middle East.

In our work we shall try to analyze the factors that provoked changed in the attitude of state actors regarding the Abraham Accords. We shall see what made the EU change its attitude regarding the Accords. The global interest of a nation, a state or a community may determine the action of that entity. We are going to check whether interest is a more important factor than ideology or belief in a paradigm. In our case European skepticism of the Abraham Accords did not stand in front of new challenges that occurred in the region – the Russian invasion to Ukraine and all the consequences around it.

## **Literature review**

In a recent voyage I made to Brussels, having the privilege to accompany Israel's President, Isaac Herzog, to the European Parliament, I was surprised to discover the lack of enthusiasm the European states, members of the EU related to the Abraham Accord. Peace is a value in modern Europe and the Abraham Accords deal with normalization, which is a step beyond peace, especially in the Middle East. I was surprised to discover that Europe who militates for peace was not engaged in the Abraham Accords but preferred to be stuck in old solutions as the only possible one, like for example the two states solution.

In 2020 one could see that European decision and opinion makers generally dismissed the Abraham Accords as a diversion from the Palestinian issue. But something made the difference. Something no one expected: the outbreak of the Ukraine war and the advance of Iran's nuclear program. Europeans started realizing the potential contribution of those Accords to energy and food security and European interests in Africa.

One must understand the great potential of geopolitical changes. In this case they offer Israel an opportunity to advance trilateral partnerships with Europe and with the signatories of the Abraham Accords.<sup>1</sup> In fact, countries with whom Israel had discrete relations became open. The normalization agreements signed between Israel with the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Bahrain in August 2020 and later with Morocco in December 2020, have formalized intelligence and economic ties that had previously as we mentioned, existed discretely. It opened a gate to a potential new cooperation as well as new perspectives in the region.

Official relations have the potential to make things easy or at least easier. In this case, they have enabled business partnerships, academic cooperation as well as direct investments and tourism. Fruitful synergies can emerge from the same accords thanks to Israel's technological edge, the financial resources of the UAE and Bahrain. One can add of course Morocco's status as having the world's most extensive reservoir of phosphates – the most widely used source of fertilizer.

Yet strangely enough all this potential that we mentioned as well as the actual potential of the agreements to energy and food security the accords did not impress the Europeans. They had difficulties understanding the Accords signed in Washington DC in President Trump's era which probably also contributed to the lack of enthusiasm. Europeans saw in the accord nothing more than a gimmick staged by former U.S President Donald Trump for his 2020 presidential campaign and as diversion from the Palestinian issue. For Europeans obviously the Palestinian issue is a key element and a key challenge in order to achieve peace in the Middle East, the main obstacle that prevents any possible solution. The Abraham Accords are on the contrary a total opposite approach. A change of paradigm: progress can be made in the Middle East in parallel to the Palestinian issue. Very difficult for Europeans to accept or even comprehend. The war in Ukraine caused a beginning of a change in the way of thinking of some European diplomats and think tanks. They started noticing the potential of the Abraham Accords for Europe's security and energy needs. One has to always keep in mind the wariness of Europe from an immense energy crisis before the Russian invasion of

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<sup>1</sup> Emanuel Navon, "Leveraging the Abraham Accords for Israel's Relations with Europe", Jerusalem Institute for Strategy and Security, 2022 [<https://jiss.org.il/en/navon-leveraging-the-abraham-accords-for-israels-relations-with-europe>].

Ukraine took place. They started thinking of alternative markets for their energy needs.<sup>2</sup>

One could see clearer. The two actors, Europeans and Israel, could see the potential of leveraging on the level of upgrading relations between Israel and Europe. Soon enough Israel and its European partners could see how much work can be done that can change the life of millions of people. With the partnership of the three Arab signatories (UAE, Bahrain and Morocco) of the Accords, Europe could contribute to the 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 visit 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, one backing Israel and moderate Sunni States – the U.S. and the Russia -backed one of the Iranian regimes and its proxies.<sup>3</sup>

While Israel had initially tried to keep a low profile in Russia's war against Ukraine which can be explained of course by Russia's presence on Syrian soil and Israel's strategic need not to undermine its freedom of action in Syrian's airspace, neutrality is no longer an option. The United States has great expectation from its allies to stand with it and the conflicting interests between Israel and Russia can no longer be ignored. On one hand Putin's increased support for Iran and on the other his hostility to alternative Gaz supplies for the EU created a larger gap in the positions between Moscow and Jerusalem without forgetting Russia's legal proceedings against the Jewish agency in its territory. Russia has become a threat to the EU and arguably to Israel.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Izabella Surwillo, "Reflections on the Energy Crisis in Europe", *Progressive Yearbook*, 2023 [<https://feps-europe.eu/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/Progressive-Yearbook-2023.pdf>].

<sup>3</sup> Navon, *art. cit.*

<sup>4</sup> Robert O. Freedman, "Israel's Tightrope between Russia and Ukraine" in *Middle East Quarterly*, Fall 2022, volume 29, no. 4 [<https://www.meforum.org/middle-east-quarterly/pdfs/63520.pdf>].

Other changes occur due to new regional evolutions. Other actors in the region understand new waves of changes due to the same accords. Turkey is an important actor that reflects the new realignment in the region or in the Mediterranean to be more specific. The Turkish president who easily manipulates his country foreign affairs according to international world changes also understood the new regional picture.<sup>5</sup> Ever since 2009 the relations between Turkey and Israel were deteriorated severely and in contrast Israel has developed its relations with Greece including in the military sector and its energy partnership with Cyprus. Turkey followed attentively those developing relations. The Abraham Accords were probably one step too much for Ankara. Erdogan had no other choice and decided the option of mending his relations with Jerusalem. Turkey made its choice: Erdogan'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.

Meanwhile, in parallel to Turkey's foreign regional policy change, the UAE and Israel have upgraded their intelligence cooperation against Turkey and Qatar as the emirates themselves strongly oppose the Muslim Brotherhood which enjoys the support of both countries, Turkey and Qatar. Egypt too followed the changes. 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 and the Palestinian Authority.<sup>6</sup>

The Abraham Accords have the advantage of offering an opportunity to formalize defense cooperation in the eastern Mediterranean between the UAE, Greece, Egypt, Greece, Cyprus Israel and two EU states France and Italy. Two European states who increased their naval presence in the eastern Mediterranean to deter Turkey. Jordan is on the way. One could also notice the improvement of relations between Egypt, Jordan and Israel since the signature of those accords. It helps a lot the change of climate in the region which strengthens regional cooperation. One must add the military cooperation which becomes a key element due to Iran's threat regional as well as global. The progress of Iran's nuclear program has transformed the

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<sup>5</sup> Steven A Cook, "Ukraine's War Is Erdogan's Opportunity" in *Foreign Policy*, March 29, 2022 [<https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/03/29/ukraine-war-erdogan-peace-negotiation-ceasefire/>].

<sup>6</sup> Egypt Independent, "First Energy Agreement Concluded by EU was with Egypt and Israel", February 14, 2023 [<https://egyptindependent.com/first-energy-agreement-concluded-by-eu-was-with-egypt-and-israel/>]

Islamic republic into a threshold country, thus acquiring the capacity to build nuclear weapons quickly. This is a new reality that threatens directly Israel that always declared its obligation to prevent any hostile state possessing a nuclear capacity and the UAE, neighboring country of Iran and like its ally Saudi Arabia feeling directly threaten by Tehran. Iran shares with the UAE the shores of the Hormuz Strait. Iran with its nuclear capacity 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 threatens Europeans too with their long-range missile program. Moreover, Iran also threatens France's interest in their interference in North Africa and sub-Saharan Africa. Iran's status as a threshold nuclear state increases the potential for trilateral cooperation between Israel the UAE and Europe.<sup>7</sup>

### **A great potential for Africa**

Morocco, one of the members of the Abraham Accords, is an African state. It is based in north Africa and a member of the Arab Maghrib union (not very united one must add). In fact, Morocco and Israel had diplomatic relations between 1994 to 2002 and that facilitated the renewal of the relations that were stopped after the second Intifada. The renewal of the relations was also facilitated after Trump's decision to recognize Morocco's sovereignty over western Sahara, a dispute 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 Morocco in 1975). It was not a secret to all the fact that Morocco was worried from Iran's support to the Polisario front.<sup>8</sup>

The Abraham Accords were a good opportunity for Morocco and Israel to coordinate security cooperation between the two countries. France on the one hand did not appreciate Israeli presence in an ally like Morocco but it was a good alliance and security cooperation against Iran and Russian involvement on the African continent. Iran declared its desire to upgrade its

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<sup>7</sup> Luigi Scazzieri, "Europe and the Iran Nuclear Threat", Center for European Reform, February 2023.

<sup>8</sup> Oscar Rickett, Daniel Hilton, "Israel and Morocco to Normalize Ties as US Recognizes Rabat's Claim to Western Sahara", Middle East Eye, 2020  
[<https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/israel-morocco-normalisation-us-western-sahara-recognises>].

relations in Africa and it did so in August 2011 shortly after the election of its President Ebrahim Raisi. He announced that Iran would prioritize its relations with Africa. That was not new. Former Iranian Presidents also invested in the African continent. Mauritania was another country targeted by the Iranians especially after the northern Arabic states upgraded its relations with Israel in 1999. Iran's policy was to invest in African states infrastructure in order to undermine Africa's ties with the U.S with Saudi and obviously with Israel.<sup>9</sup>

Iran's interest in Africa must be taken into consideration. Tehran is counting not only on regimes but also on communities. It knows it can count on the political and economic clout on 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. How ether the economic sanctions imposed by the Obama and Trump administrations weakened Iran's financial capabilities to benefit Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Israel". Iran operates companies in Africa in order to circumvent economic sanctions. Such companies operate in countries like Republic of Congo, Nigeria, Senegal, Ghana and Tanzania.

Europeans show worries from those changes in Africa and the growing influence of countries like Russia and Iran on the African continent. French President Emmanuel Macron did not hesitate to denounce "Russian imperialism and neo-colonialism" in the African continent. Africa, especially the western and central part, is in a certain way under French influence. Paris did not appreciate Russia's interference in its back yard. Paris saw due to the Abraham Accords, Israel as an option for military cooperation in the African continent. Israel can be for France a valuable partner for its 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.<sup>10</sup>

France security option or choice towards Israel can also be explained by Morocco 's choice of joining the Abraham Accords. Israel can benefit from Morocco's economic clout in Africa. In the past fifteen years, Morocco has become the world's largest investor in West Africa and the second largest in all the continent.

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<sup>9</sup> Clement Therme, "Iran's Policy in Africa: Between Ideological Dimensions and Economic Enticement", Rasanah International Institute for Iranian Studies, 2022 [<https://rasanah-iiis.org/english/?p=10043>].

<sup>10</sup> Navon, *art. cit.*

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.<sup>11</sup>

It was important to note that in August 2022 King Mohammed VI called upon Morocco's allies to recognize its sovereignty over western Sahara. No one can ignore a connection between the historical events. Previous Israel's Interior Minister, Ayelet Shaked, expressed Israel's first ever public support of Moroccan sovereignty over western Sahara in June 2022. The connection between Israel's recognition of Morocco's sovereignty over Western Sahara and Morocco's alliance to the Abraham Accords was almost natural. The subject is so sensible that any visit to Algeria, hostile to the idea, was interpreted in a negative way by Morocco such as the official visit of Macron to Algeria in August 2022 given Algeria's support for the Polisario Front.<sup>12</sup>

### **Energy and Food security in connection to the Accords**

"The European Commission's President, Ursula Van der Leyen, came to Israel in June 2022 in order to sign a natural gas agreement and has turned Israel into a partner for reducing the EU's dependance on Russian gaz. The Abraham Accords countries constitute a significant energy hub which is 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".<sup>13</sup> This energy hub has three components: Israel's natural gas resources and Israel's technological edge. The UAE's significant oil production (three million barrels per day) and Morocco's leadership in renewable energies especially solar energy projects and is the only African country to have a power cable link to Europe.

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<sup>11</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>12</sup> Lazar Berman, "Shaked Affirms Support of Morocco on Western Sahara, Says She's First Israeli to Do So" in *Times of Israel*, 22 June 2022 [<https://www.timesofisrael.com/shaked-affirms-support-of-morocco-on-western-sahara-says-shes-1st-israeli-to-do-so>].

<sup>13</sup> Navon, *art. cit.*



Grain supply has been impacted by the conflict in Ukraine, increasing food costs. Therefore, the cooperation between Morocco and Israel was a way to fight food crisis as Morocco contains 75% of the world's phosphate reserves used as fertilizer and the world's largest producer of phosphates, Israel has made technological advancements to agricultural productivity and water management.<sup>14</sup> One must understand that improving food security is a European and African interest. For Europe its also an interest as food scarcity constitutes a key initiative to illegal immigration from Africa to Europe.

### **Iran's intervention in Ukraine war**

Despite Western sanctions Teheran is doubling down on military support for Russia in a series of new military deals that definitely could prolong the war in Ukraine and offer sanction – battered Teheran new economic and defense lifelines.<sup>15</sup>

In public top U.S and allied leaders have castigated Iran for supplying Russia with drones and vowed to use everything in their power to block those shipments. But behind closed doors, officials concedes that there are no realistic avenues to stem the flow of Iranian military goods into Russia for it to deploy to Ukraine. Moreover, Russian military support for Iran could give the country's military additional advantages against any potential military confrontations with the United States or its allies in the Middle East. One could also raise the real and possible option of Russia to supply Iran with advanced air defense systems such as the S-300 or S-400 missile system. Such an event, very significant military, would help Teheran better protect its infrastructure for nuclear weapons from possible Israeli strikes.<sup>16</sup>

Israel has tried its best to engage Europe against a bad new Iran deal that would prevent Iran from possessing nuclear military power as well as new economic sanctions against the mullah Regime. Israel did it without real success, but two serious events have provoked a real change: the civil uprising in September 2022 against the regime and the murder of an Iranian demonstrator and the provision of Iranian drones to Russia that are used in

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<sup>14</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>15</sup> Robbie Gramer and Amy Mackinnon, "Iran and Russia Are Closer than Ever Before" in *Foreign Policy*, January 5, 2023 [<https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/03/03/russia-iran-drones-uav-ukraine-war-military-cooperation-sanctions>].

<sup>16</sup> *Ibidem*.

the Ukrainian war. This provoked a real change in Europe's attitude towards Iran and played a role also in the significant understanding and cooperation between Europe and Israel in the Iran issue.<sup>17</sup>

One must not forget that the Arab Abraham Accords partners see also the Iranian nuclear program as a threat towards them (UAE and Bahrein) as well as Morocco who sees Iran's interference in its interior affairs. All that also contributed to Europe's interest in the matter especially with great understanding to Israeli interest as well as its partners in the Abraham Accords.

### **Conclusion**

The Abraham Accords was initially dismissed in Europe as insignificant but are now perceived as an opportunity to help Europe face its economic and political challenges. Israel understood that the Abraham accords were a great potential to upgrade their relations with Europe.

Europe was trapped in an old narrative about the Mideast peace process and the Israeli Palestinian conflict, the EU was reluctant to embrace the Abraham Accords which were viewed as an American initiative led by former President Donald Trump, his son in law Jared Kushner and other senior officials in the administration. Some decision makers in the EU had to acknowledge that their narrative is obsolete. The war in Ukraine has provoked a real obligation to Europeans to look for a new response to their crisis management – interior (energy demand) and exterior (international affairs regarding neighbors and allies expectations).

“Since then, however and with the growing development of the relations between Israel, Bahrein, the UAE and Morocco, the EU has apparently slowly acknowledged the importance of the accords for the political and economic stability of the region”.<sup>18</sup>

Yet, the Abraham Accords have permitted a real evolution in international affairs, especially when it comes to Europe's relation with

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<sup>17</sup> Cornelius Adebahr, “Iran Provides a Sign of the Turmoil to Come – This Is How Europe Should Respond” in *The Parliament*, April 2023  
[<https://www.theparliamentmagazine.eu/news/article/iran-turmoil-europe-security-russia-israel>].

<sup>18</sup> Yossi Lempkowicz, “Europe Slowly Understands the Importance of the Abraham Accords”, *EU Reporter*, March 14, 2023  
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Israel, ties between Europe – Israel and the African continent and Arab countries with Israel, Africa and Europe not forgetting the alliance against Iran. Indeed, it took time for Europe to understand and promote the Abraham Accords but once the European partners have understood the potential of those accords, they embraced them for the benefit of all the potential partners. In fact, those Accords do not only transform the Middle East but they have the possibility of transforming other continents in the world. One can only imagine the potential of a newcomer like Saudi Arabia to the agreement. Some see in the recent rapprochement between Iran and the Saudis - signed in China - a great test for the Accords but as stated by American secretary of state Tony Blinken: “Iran rapprochement does not in any way substitute U.S push to expand Abraham Accords”.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Marc Rod, “Blinken: Saudi, Iran Rapprochement ‘Does Not in Any Way Substitute’ US Push to Expand Abraham Accords” in *Jewish Insider*, 2023  
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