

# THE EXTENDED ABRAHAM ACCORDS: CUNNING AUTOCRATS AND THE DISORIENTED GREAT POWER

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On February 2, 2023, the United States Department of Homeland Security expanded the Abraham Accords—a series of mutual recognition and normalization agreements between the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Morocco, and Israel signed in 2020—to include cybersecurity cooperation.<sup>1</sup> With the Gulf states and Israel notorious for exploiting cyber technology for political repression, American participation in cyber technology exchanges marks yet another indication of US willingness to work with autocrats at the expense of the region's democracy.

It is important to recognize that even the original Abraham Accords have had a chilling effect on Gulf civil societies, which had successfully pushed for limited democratization by autocrats. Before the signed normalization with Israel, civil society organizations mobilizing on the Palestinian cause served as one of the very few forms of political activism tolerated by regimes in the Middle East.

Organizations campaigning for Palestinian rights were permitted in civil society and on university campuses, exposing people to a sense of political agency and active citizenship in their formative years.<sup>2</sup> Such organizations have also gone beyond the Palestinian cause into a wider range of political activism, generating spillover effects in building politically minded citizens, and serving effectively as a driver for potential democratization. In Egypt, for example, pro-Palestine protests in 2000 united opposition groups with varying political agendas—the Islamists, leftists, Arab nationalists—thereby creating a network of activists that helped bring about the Arab Spring.<sup>3</sup>

After normalizing relations with Israel in 2020, however, Gulf countries such as the UAE and Qatar became increasingly willing to suppress pro-Palestinian activism.<sup>4</sup> According to Dana El-Kurd, a political scientist at University of Richmond, despite the absence of a formal peace, Qatari university officials have

taken it upon themselves to shut down pro-Palestinian student activism, anticipating that an eventual Qatari-Israeli treaty is near. Worse, the expansion of the Abraham Accords would enable Gulf governments to further clamp down on activism through surveillance technology shared with Israel. Tess McEnery, executive director of the Project on Middle East Democracy, notes that, “Saudi Arabia and the UAE, for example, are the leading wielders and exporters of digital authoritarianism in the Middle East, collaborating with China, Russia, and Israel to access surveillance tools such as NSO Group’s Pegasus spyware to target people and governments across the globe.” The Abraham Accords, a seeming move towards greater cooperation and peace among Middle East and North African (MENA) countries, in fact have aggravated political repression by authoritarian states.

On the other side of the Arabian Peninsula, peace with Israel also comes at the cost of democratic retreat in nearby countries, namely Jordan and Egypt. Spe-

cifically, the United States’ willingness to support authoritarian states in exchange for peace with Israel and an enforcement of the status quo contributes to the regimes’ authoritarian endurance by increasing their coercive capacity. Since 1978, Egypt has enjoyed massive US aid packages for military development and economic subsidies after then-president Anwar Sadat made official peace with Israel at Camp David.<sup>5</sup> Egypt also helped mediate President George Bush’s roadmap peace initiative between Israel and Palestine, culminating in the 2005 Sharm El-Sheikh Summit with Palestinian Authority (PA) president, Mahmoud Abbas, and Israeli prime minister, Ariel Sharon, to mark the end of the Second Intifada.<sup>6,7</sup>

Most recently, Egypt brokered a ceasefire between Israel and Hamas in August 2022.<sup>8</sup> Because the United States values the region’s peace with Israel, it is willing to support Egypt due to its importance first in the Arab-Israeli peace process and later in policing Gaza and brokering talks among Hamas, Fatah, and Israel.<sup>9</sup> Jordan, another Israel-friend-

ly state, also receives preferential treatments from the US, which has doled out aids that sustain patronage networks and fund an expansive coercive apparatus that Jordan’s own economy could not afford. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict directly plays into this authoritarian endurance because it engenders US support for regimes that support peace with Israel and help maintain order in the Palestinian territories.

US support aside, MENA countries benefit from the protracted Israeli-Palestinian conflict in their own ways. The Egypt-brokered natural gas extraction agreement between Israel and the PA in 2022 is a case in point. Since the discovery of Gaza Marine, a gas field, in 1999, Israel has been resisting requests from private Palestinians, the PA, and Gaza’s de facto ruling party, Hamas, to explore it. As the usual negotiator on Israeli-Gaza affairs, Egypt assumed the role. In October 2022, Egypt reached an agreement with Israel and the PA to extract Gaza Marine and allocate 45 percent of the revenue to the Egyptian state-owned Egyptian Natural

Gas Holding Company (ENGC). On the other hand, the PA’s Palestine Investment Fund will get 27.5 percent while the Palestinian-owned Consolidated Contractors Company gets 27.5 percent.<sup>10</sup> By taking advantage of its mediator role, Egypt further undermined Palestinian sovereignty by taking away a significant portion of the gas revenue that could be used to develop the Palestinian government and civil society.

The two recent developments—America’s expansion of the Abraham Accords into cybersecurity and Egypt’s exploitation of Gaza’s gas—reveal the worrying expansion of authoritarian state powers at the expense of citizen livelihoods. The United States will not be immune to democratic retreat, either. McEnery warns of the threats against its national security interests should the United States fail to proactively develop human rights norms and eschew support for the use of repressive technologies by Israel and Gulf countries. To truly defend democracy in the Middle East, a new American foreign policy is long overdue.