

Abraham Accords Anniversary Sept. 15: Peace Treaties Continue to Grow

written by Meir Ben Shabbat | 13.09.2024

The terrible war imposed on Israel on Oct. 7 tested not only Israel's military power and national strength but also its relations with its neighbors in the Arab and Muslim world.

An emergency conference of leaders from these countries that convened in Saudi Arabia in the first month of the war, turned into a verbal demonstration of support for the Palestinians. As Israel's actions in Gaza increased, so did the fears for the future of peace and the fate of the Abraham Accords, which in a short period of time had enough to experience a pandemic, security crises, and unprecedented political upheavals.

Sunday, Sept. 15, marks the fourth anniversary of the signing of the accords.

Despite difficult conditions, even this time, the question marks were once again replaced by an exclamation mark. The relationship stood strong even in the face of the anti-Israeli campaign and the difficult pictures from Gaza. Except for Sudan — which was shaken by a civil war — stability is maintained in all other arenas. That same optimism can be attributed to the continued possibility of Saudi Arabia and other countries joining the Abraham Accords.

On Oct. 7, the normalization between Israel and its normal neighbors took a hard hit from its abnormal neighbors, yet remained steady. Already at the beginning of the war, the Abraham Accords countries signaled their intention to preserve relations with Israel and not let Hamas sabotage them. These countries were among the first to publicly condemn Hamas for the monstrous attack it carried out on the Jewish holiday of Simchat Torah.

UAE President Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed welcomed Israeli President Isaac Herzog for a meeting on the sidelines of COP28 in Dubai while the military campaign on the battlefield continued. Since the war broke out, Israel's ministers of economy, energy, and strategic affairs all made public visits to the UAE and

met with their colleagues. The IDF Chief of Staff participated in a summit in Bahrain, while a delegation of Israeli rabbis visited Morocco.

The Emirati minister of state for foreign trade and the Bahraini minister of finance stated that they intend to continue promoting economic relations with Israel, while at the same time in interviews he gave to the media, the head of the Moroccan mission in Israel praised the cooperation between the countries.

The Technology and Innovation Institute of the United Arab Emirates announced the establishment of an artificial intelligence center at the Technion in Haifa, while the Moroccan government signed a billion-dollar satellite deal with the Israeli Aerospace Industry.

While most foreign airlines canceled their flights to Israel, FlyDubai and Etihad of the United Arab Emirates were among the only airlines in the world that continued flying to Israel.

And perhaps the most surprising: Trade between Israel and the Abraham Accords countries continues to increase significantly. According to a report recently published by the Abraham Accords Peace Institute: In the first half of 2024, there was a 7% increase in trade between Israel and the UAE, a 709% increase in trade between Israel and Bahrain, a 64% increase in trade between Israel and Morocco, and a 53% increase in trade between Israel and Egypt. These figures are relative to the first half of last year and reflect significant progress in economic relations between America's allies in the region.

Such a significant increase in trade at a time of multifront war that increases uncertainty in the region, is not a matter of course and shouldn't be taken for granted. As crazy as it seems, one of the factors that contributed to this trade growth is the war itself.

In the recent past, European companies used to send their cargoes of goods to the Gulf countries through the port of Beirut. These goods arrived by boat via the Mediterranean Sea and were loaded in the port of Beirut on trucks that took them from Lebanon through Syria to the Gulf countries. However, because of the Syrian Civil War and escalation in the conflict with Hezbollah in Lebanon, the use of this route has decreased over the past decade.

The preferred alternate route was from Egypt through the Suez Canal and the

Red Sea to the Gulf. But in recent months, even this trade route has become problematic. The threats of the Houthis and their attacks in the Red Sea resulted in the shutdown of a significant part of the civilian maritime traffic on this route.

And so, the land route through Israel became the safest trade route between Europe and Asia. What was impossible before the Abraham Accords because of the boycott in the Arab world against Israel, became the preferred and most worthwhile route.

In recent months, the volume of cargo and goods passing through the Sheikh Hussein crossing between Israel and Jordan, and through the Nitsana crossing between Israel and Egypt, has been increasing. The traffic jams and congestion at the border crossings confirm the picture that emerges from the dry data and indicate that despite the war, when it comes to trade — it's still business as usual.

Israel has a clear interest in preserving the positive momentum created and developing trade along this route. To this end, it will first of all have to expand the infrastructure at the border crossings and ports, including increasing the number of workers there and extending their hours of operation. It would be correct to get Jordan to agree to this effort in order to encourage the increase in trade and to optimize the transportation of cargo.

The diplomatic crisis between Israel and Turkey, which has negatively affected imports to Israel the food sector, provides an opportunity to expand imports from other sources in the region — mainly from Egypt. Due to the threat from the Houthis in the Red Sea, there are fewer Egyptian exports through the Suez Canal. The Egyptian economy is suffering a serious blow but can improve it through the expansion of land trade with Israel. Moving goods through Israel is the safest way for Egypt to export products eastward to the Gulf and Asia.

To reduce unnecessary regulation, Israel must complete the signing of free trade agreements with Bahrain, Morocco, Egypt and Jordan similar to the agreement already signed between Israel and the United Arab Emirates. Even if the timing is not suitable for this because of the war, it is right to complete the negotiations and prepare the groundwork for the day when it becomes possible.

The developments in Sudan require Israel and the United States to take emergency measures to stop the Iranian influence that has increased in this region, following the civil war and after the delay in progress of the Abraham

Accords. For about a year and a half, a bloody war has been going on in Sudan between the military ruler, General Abdel Fattah Al-Burhan, and his deputy, Hemedti, who attempted to stage a coup against him.

Iran saw this as an opportunity to sink its claws into Sudan and began to supply UAVs to Burhan, who had previously been the one to carry the normalization with Israel on his back. His appeal to Tehran was not out of sympathy with it, but as a coercion due to a vacuum left by the United States and the lack of weapons and means to defend his country.

From Iran's point of view, Sudan is a strategic asset in light of its geographical location that can create an operational base for terror activity against the shores of the Red Sea, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Sinai, the Gaza Strip and Israel, and on the other hand, against African countries.

Many steps are necessary to expand the circle of peace, but the chances of an agreement with Saudi Arabia have not diminished. The same goes for other desirable countries. They are all waiting for "the right time," in view of the multi-stakeholder war and the upcoming U.S. presidential election.

One way or another, even in the shadow of the war, the facts on the ground show that the Abraham Accords countries still strive to develop and deepen their ties with Israel in many areas. The Abraham Accords were founded on a concept of peace through strength. Not only military power but also economic and technological power. Although the current war pushed them out of the headlines, these peace treaties have quietly become part of the landscape of our lives.

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Strengthening Israel-Sudan Ties

and Preserving the Abraham Accords

written by David Aaronson | 13.09.2024

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written by Meir Ben Shabbat | 13.09.2024

Rather than have Saudi Arabia try to keep up with Iran by getting enrichment capabilities, Israel should hope the US acts to bring an end to Iran's threatening capabilities.

The message: Neutralizing Iran comes before normalization with Riyadh

written by Meir Ben Shabbat | 13.09.2024

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Yes to Peace with Riyadh

written by David M. Weinberg | 13.09.2024

"If there's a fire burning in their backyard, it's going to be a lot tougher, if not impossible, to actually both deepen the existing agreements, as well as to expand them to include potentially Saudi Arabia," US Secretary of State Antony Blinken recently said about the message Washington has been communicating to senior Israeli officials. During his speech at the Council on Foreign Relations, he said that the effort to have Israel and Saudi Arabia normalize ties was "incredibly challenging" but also said that it is "a real prospect."

We shouldn't underestimate the impact that the current security situation in Judea and Samaria may have on the normalization efforts. Public sentiment sensitivities play a role; leaders in most countries try to avoid a situation in which

they go against the overall prevailing opinion of the masses. The images coming out of Judea and Samaria do not add sympathy to Israel, to say the least. They provide easy propaganda fodder for Islamists, pro-Palestinian groups, and other anti-Israel elements. When Israel is viewed in a negative light on the street, everyone has to keep a lower profile until things calm down.

That said, it appears that Blinken is keen on capitalizing on Israel's strong urge to normalize ties with Saudi Arabia by using it as leverage on the Jewish state on the Palestinian issue. The Biden administration has yet to reach any significant accomplishment on normalization, and despite clearly showing it wants to expand the Abraham Accords, Washington doesn't have much to show for it.

Not only have no new countries joined the accords, but the progress in the existing agreements is also only through the bilateral channels established during the previous administration. Apart from the Negev Forum, whose importance was in that it actually convened, there have not been significant projects or initiatives on a multi-national scale since the accords were signed.

The agreement with Sudan has yet to have been completed and is currently in limbo because of the ongoing civil war. Even with Morocco, with which relations have been expanding and deepening as of late, there has yet to be a shift in the political echelons that would allow a full-fledged embassy to be opened in both countries, and the king has yet to meet Israeli officials.

The truth must be said: Israel's conduct may be a factor in how the Saudis decide on normalization, but it is not the crucial factor. The US and its policies in the region have had a much stronger effect on shaping the current reality. America's weakening and its conduct in the region drove Saudi Arabia to the arms of the Chinese and as a result - albeit unintentionally - hurt the momentum with Israel.

Normalization between Saudi Arabia and Israel is a vested US interest and the West, not just in Jerusalem and Riyadh. It will drive the kingdom farther away from the Chinese-Iranian-Russian orbit and will grant the advantage it needs in the competition over the new world order. It has the potential to turn Saudi Arabia into an international hub that would connect Europe, Africa, and Asia, thus revolutionizing international trade.

As far as Israel is concerned, normalization with Saudi Arabia is an important objective, but not at all costs. Concessions on Iran and nuclear proliferation in the

Middle East, as well as security-related gestures on the Palestinian theater, do not give enough bang for the buck, despite the major boon normalization would be.