

AMERICA'S MIDDLE EAST FOREIGN POLICY IN THE 21st CENTURY: A STUDY OF ARAB-ISRAELI CONFLICT (2017-2021)

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.57233/zjpd.v6i1.25>

ABSTRACT

The Abraham Accords, signed in 2020 under the Trump administration, marked a significant shift in U.S. Middle East foreign policy by normalising relations between Israel and several Arab states (UAE, Bahrain, Sudan, and Morocco) while decoupling these agreements from progress on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. This study critically evaluates the Accords' impact on the Arab-Israeli conflict between 2017 and 2021, focusing on regional diplomacy, Palestinian national aspirations, the viability of the two-state solution, and compliance with international law. Anchored in Hegemonic stability theory, the research examines how U.S. transactional diplomacy, unilateral actions (including recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's capital and sovereignty over the Golan Heights), and the "Peace to Prosperity" plan prioritised strategic alliances and Counter-Iran efforts over traditional multilateral frameworks such as UN Security Council Resolution 242. Employing a qualitative instrumental case study design, the study draws on semi-structured elite interviews and extensive document analysis, analysed through thematic methods. Findings reveal substantial short-term gains in trade, security cooperation, and bilateral ties among signatories. However, the Accords marginalised Palestinian aspirations, weakened prospects for a viable two-state solution, and challenged established international norms. While advancing pragmatic hegemonic order, the agreements risk long-term instability by sidelining core conflict drivers. The study offers policy insights for more inclusive approaches to great-power mediation in protracted disputes.

Keywords: U.S. Foreign Policy, Middle East, Foreign Policy, Arab-Israeli conflict, Hegemonic Stability Theory, regional normalization

1.1 Introduction

The Arab-Israeli conflict continues to be one of the longest and most complicated conflict situations in the modern world. Deep historical claims, religious importance, territorial dispute and recurrent violence are part of the conflict which has its modern roots in the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948. It has grown into a much more complex issue than the Israeli-Palestinian conflict over the decades, and has expanded to include broader regional geopolitics, proxy wars, and external interventions, which have had a profound impact on Middle Eastern alliances, resource distribution and security dynamics (Mbandlwa, 2024).

The United States has been, and continues to be, a key and dynamic player in the Middle East. With regard to U.S. policy after 9/11, the focus was on counterterrorism, regime change, and democracy promotion, all of which could add to regional instability. The Obama administration (2009-2017) took a more multilateral stance, especially with the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) with Iran (2015) and support for the Arab Spring transitions. But various obstacles, including the Syrian civil war, the spread of ISIS, and mounting Iranian influence, complicated these efforts, highlighting the strains between America's efforts to protect Israel from attacks and its ties with wider Arab alliances (Office of the Historian, 2019).

Transaction and unilateral diplomacy were clearly the hallmarks of the Trump administration (2017–2021). During this time, Israeli interests, economic interests, and strategic realignments were put before

traditional multilateral approaches. Significant policy developments involve the recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's capital as well as the relocation of the U.S. Embassy in 2018, the acknowledgment of Israeli sovereignty over the Golan Heights in 2019 and the unveiling of the “Peace to Prosperity” vision on January 28, 2020. The latter called for a statehood plan that is land-for-peace, but for now it is a conditional one anchored in a \$50 billion economic package, recognition of Israeli sovereignty over major settlement blocs and a demilitarised Palestinian state with limited sovereignty — a clear break from land-for-peace, which has been at the heart of UNSC Resolution 242 (1967) (Al Jazeera, 2020).

One of the pillars of this new approach was the Abraham Accords (2020), which paved the way for diplomatic and economic ties to be normalised between Israel and the UAE, Bahrain, Sudan and Morocco, while maintaining the status quo on Palestine statehood, borders, refugees and Jerusalem. The Accords represented a significant departure from the Arab consensus, including the 2002 Arab Peace Initiative (Vakil & Quilliam, 2023), which had previously been in place and had been supported by the majority of Arab nations.

Twenty years or more of diplomatic rhetoric in which the Palestinian issue was a pivotal component in the relationship between the Arabs and Israelis, the Accords cut the linkage because of the emphasis on bilateral transactional deals. This study aims to examine critically the effects of the Abraham Accords on the Arab-Israeli conflict within 2017-2021. It is based on four guiding research questions about what it means for the region's peace, what it means for Palestinian aspirations,

what it means for the two state approach, and what it means for international law. The overall goal is to determine if these normalisation agreements are promoting real peace or normalising Palestinian rejection of their right to self-determination, and undermining international norms. The study enriches the literature on transactional diplomacy and provides policy guidance that highlights the importance of approaches to transactional diplomacy that are inclusive, incorporating strategic elements and considerations of justice and legitimacy. It examines U.S. policy in the period January 2017 to January 2021, using document analysis and elite interviews, and points out some of its limitations, including the lack of access to classified materials and to long-term developments post-2021.

1.2 Literature Review

The Abraham Accords have been central to the academic debate around U.S. Middle East foreign policy during Trump's tenure (2017–2021) as a major shift away from the diplomatic tradition. The section summarizes the seminal ideas, empirical findings, outlines research gaps, and puts the study into the context of Hegemonic Stability Theory (HST).

The Abraham Accords (2020) normalised relations between Israel and the UAE, Bahrain, Sudan and Morocco, which did not demand that any progress be made on key Palestinian issues. This was a shift from earlier plans which had put the Israeli-Palestinian track at the heart of the region's peace efforts (Vakil & Quilliam, 2023). A key principle of the Accords is "decoupling" in that the Arab precondition of linking normalisation with Israel to the solution of the Palestinian issue (as

stipulated in the 2002 Arab Peace Initiative and UN Security Council Resolution 242 (1967)) is eliminated from the equation. Decoupling has been touted by proponents as realistic pragmatism that facilitates cooperation in the face of mutual threats such as Iran, and disapproved by critics as a method that cements Israeli dominance over the occupied territories and removes Arab leverage (Elgindy, 2025; Telhami, 2021).

Palestinian marginalisation is a process of systematic exclusion of Palestinian national aspirations, rights and agency. The Accords diverted Palestinians' attention away from the issues of settlements, refugees, and Jerusalem, and positioned them as secondary to a new pragmatic coalition of economic and security interests at the elite level (Elgindy, 2025; Kateb, 2025).

Regional realignment is the realignment of Middle East alliances into partnerships based on interests. The Accords had worked to establish a 'moderate axis' in counterterrorism, technology and anti-Iran cooperation, resulting in concrete security and economic cooperation (Guzansky & Marshall, 2020; Singh, 2022).

Trump-era policies strived to uphold U.S. unilateralism through separate measures, including the recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's capital in 2017, the U.S. embassy move in 2018, and the recognition of Israel's sovereignty over the Golan Heights in 2019. This was done without the involvement of multilateral institutions and without an old-fashioned approach to mediation, which was balanced (Indyk, 2021; Thrall, 2020).

Lastly, the two-state solution, based on UN resolution 242 and the 'land for peace'

principle, has been seriously undermined. Critics argue that the Accords and the policies they entailed incorporated Israeli territorial acquisitions, weakened the notion of contiguity, and reduced trust, making a viable sovereign Palestinian state increasingly impossible (Kurtzer et al., 2018; Elgindy, 2025).

Empirical research shows mixed effects. Economically, Israel-UAE trade totaled some \$6.4 billion cumulatively from 2021-2024 with a goal of \$10 billion, while Morocco-Israel trade rose to \$576 million (UN Comtrade, 2025; Heritage Foundation, 2025). Security cooperation started to pick up speed with Israel's inclusion into U.S. CENTCOM (2021), joint exercises and defence exports (SIPRI, 2025; Atlantic Council, 2025).

But there is considerable hesitation in public opinion. Polling conducted by both Arab Barometer (2025) and Washington Institute (2022) revealed low levels of favourability towards normalisation, with 19–25% of the Arab population of signatory countries being favourable with the policy, while strong support for the Palestinian cause was recorded at 80%, by the Arab population. The situation deteriorated further with post-2023 escalations in Gaza, which further depleted support. Settlement expansion continued without respite, with more than 20,000 new units built in the 2017-2020 period, which has led to the fragmentation of Palestinian territory (OCHA, 2025; Peace Now, 2025).

Despite significant literature on previous U.S. efforts (Oslo, Camp David), systematic studies of the Abraham Accords are sparse, with studies often lacking in the longitudinal dimension and examining the

relationship between unilateral gestures and their future impacts on Palestinian agency, regional coalitions and the credibility of U.S. mediation. The majority of research either focuses on short-term studies or fails to incorporate theoretical frameworks that help to explain transactional unilateralism during the Trump era (Thrall, 2020; Lynch, 2021). In terms of method, there is a need for some qualitative, elite-driven research that goes beyond the quantitative.

1.3 Theoretical Framework

The basis for this study is hegemonic stability theory (HST) of Kindleberger (1973), Gilpin (1981), and Krasner (1976). HST believes that the best way to ensure international order and stability is through a powerful hegemon that can offer public goods of security, open markets and mediation in an anarchic world. HST is relevant to this study because the United States has been the main hegemon in the Middle East, in taking part in shaping outcomes via its economic, military and diplomatic power. Trump's U.S. used hegemonic power to create a new regional order based on selective provision of public goods (security guarantees and economic opportunities) to cooperative partners and exclusion of those who resisted, such as the Palestinians (Guzansky & Marshall, 2020).

The opponents of HST say that it is too state-centric, and it neglects the significance of legitimacy, norms, and multipolarity. The U.S. unilateralism represented a breach of international standards (UN Resolution 242) and thus the hegemon's credibility as a neutral mediator was called into question (Ikenberry & Nexon, 2019; Snidal, 1985).

1.4 Methodology

This study used an instrumental case study design based on a qualitative approach. The Trump administration's involvement in the Arab-Israeli conflict, especially the Abraham Accords, was a bounded case that could shed light on the general theoretical issues of hegemonic diplomacy and conflict resolution. The information rich participants were selected using elite purposive sampling. The study focused on 15 key informants, such as diplomats (U.S., Israeli and Palestinian), academics with expertise in Middle East politics and commentators. Two complementary approaches were used to collect the data. First, the interviews were conducted with elite respondents through semi-structured interviews using online platforms or face to face interview. The interviews lasted 45-60 minutes and were conducted in a flexible manner according to a guide with the following topics: strategic goals, policy implications, international law, and lessons learned. Second, document analysis was conducted on primary documents such as texts of the Abraham Accords, the "Peace to Prosperity" plan, statements by the U.S. and Israeli governments, UN resolutions, communiqués of the Arab League and OIC, and the relevant reports by think-tanks. Thematic analysis was used to systematically find patterns in the data, organize them and interpret the results. Interviews have been fully transcribed, and documents have been numbered. Iterative reading, open coding, theme development, and theme refinement were used to connect emergent themes to the research questions.

1.5 Discussion and Findings

The main findings that emerged from the document analysis and elite interviews are presented in the following section, following the structure of the research objectives. The analysis combines empirical evidence and hegemonic stability theory (HST) to assess the impact of the Abraham Accords.

Impact on Regional Peace and Normalization

In the short term, the Abraham Accords had some significant successes in promoting normalisation and pragmatic cooperation. Bilateral trade between Israel and the UAE has increased significantly, accumulating to some \$6.4 billion over the past four years and expecting to hit \$10 billion by the time of the Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement. The volume of trade between Morocco and Israel also grew, rising to \$576 million over the same timeframe (UN Comtrade, 2025; Heritage Foundation, 2025). However, security relations suddenly escalated, with Israel joining U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM) in 2021 for more joint exercises and intelligence sharing. A large portion of Israel's defence exports to the UAE, Bahrain and Morocco, as well as to other countries, involved the sale of advanced defence systems, such as SPYDER air-defence systems to the UAE and anti-drone technologies to Bahrain and Morocco (SIPRI, 2025; Atlantic Council, 2025).

The gains were widely recognized by elite respondents, who viewed the Accords as establishing a "moderate axis" to improve deterrence against Iran, and foster economic diversification. Such

developments follow HST's focus on a hegemon offering targeted public goods, security assurances and economic incentives to compliant states and creating new regional stability architecture (Guzansky & Marshall, 2020; Singh, 2022).

Effects on Palestinian National Aspirations and Marginalization

The Accords had a major impact on the marginalisation of Palestinian aspirations despite economic and security achievements among the signatories. The agreements also eliminated one of the Arab leverage points, which has been present since the 2002 Arab Peace Initiative, by separating statehood from normalisation. The Accords were described as a “stab in the back” of the Palestinian cause by most elite interviewees, who also noted increased schisms among the Palestinian Authority and Hamas and a strengthening of the feeling of international abandonment.

This evaluation is confirmed by public opinion data. Low favourability towards normalisation (surveys by Arab Barometer, 2025; and Washington Institute, 2022) and high attachment to Palestinian issue (80% of Arabs). The “Peace to Prosperity” plan reinforced the distinctions between the two communities, with Israelis securing statehood while Palestinians are granted conditional status and the siding of Israeli settlement blocs taking precedence over Palestinian self-determination (Elgindy, 2025; Telhami, 2021). Overall, the Accords improved the state-to-state ties but reduced the agency of Palestinians in regional diplomacy.

Compliance with International Law and Norms

The results show that the two-state solution is no longer viable because of the Abraham Accords. More than 20,000 new settlement units have been approved since 2017, and additional units are expected to be approved in the future, thereby fragmenting Palestinian land. Settlement expansion has continued, with more than 20,000 new units approved since 2017 and more are likely to be approved in the future, making a contiguous and economically viable Palestinian state increasingly difficult (Peace Now, 2025; OCHA, 2025). Elite respondents pointed to U.S. recognition of Israel's capital as Jerusalem and the Golan Heights as part of Israel as undermining trust and hurting the land-for-peace deal.

Public opinion polls in Palestine and Israel indicate a lack of trust: the idea of two states is still in the conceptual phase, but the reality seems further away (PCPSR, 2020-2025; IDI, 2024-2025). The Accords changed the approach from comprehensive negotiations for peace to bilateral normalisation, which meant a cease-fire agreement was implemented more than a peace agreement.

The observance of International Law and Norms

The Accords and related U.S. policies exhibited minimal adherence to international norms. Unilateral measures, especially related to Jerusalem and the Golan Heights, infringed upon the principle of the inadmissibility of the acquisition of territory by force, as enshrined in UN Security Council Resolution 242 (1967). The reactions of the Arab League, OIC, EU and UN have

been constant, condemning these steps as degrading multilateral frameworks and Palestinian rights (Rosenne, 2020).

Interviewees, including academics and diplomats, said that the transactional approach focused more on power realities than on legal concerns, undermining the legitimacy of international law in conflict resolution.

Integration with Hegemonic Stability Theory

In an HST context, the United States was successful in the exercise of hegemonic power in reshaping regional order by offering selective public goods to those regional states willing to normalise with Israel. The speed of the economic and security agreements shows the hegemon's ability to impose new rules in an anarchic system (Kindleberger, 1973; Gilpin, 1981).

But the results also illustrate HST's weaknesses. The exclusionary character of the Accords and the breach of international standards has made them unpopular, and continued to generate opposition at the grassroots level, as well as reputational consequences for the U.S. and signatory states. This indicates a conflict between hegemonic pragmatism and the establishment of inclusive, rule-based order in protracted conflicts (Ikenberry & Nexon 2019; Snidal 1985).

In the short term, the Abraham Accords created a stability of hegemony for the signatories but forfeited long-term peacebuilding, the rights of Palestinians and the legitimacy of multilateralism. These achievements make it clear that there are inherent compromises in transactional great power diplomacy.

1.6 Conclusion and Recommendations

The study concludes that America's Middle East foreign policy under the Trump administration (2017–2021), particularly through the Abraham Accords, fundamentally reshaped regional diplomacy by prioritising strategic partnerships, economic cooperation, and security collaboration over the traditional linkage between Arab-Israeli normalisation and the resolution of the Palestinian question. The findings demonstrate that the Accords achieved notable short-term successes, including expanded trade, enhanced intelligence sharing, stronger defence cooperation, and the emergence of new regional alliances among Israel and participating Arab states. From the perspective of Hegemonic Stability Theory, these outcomes illustrate the capacity of a hegemonic power to restructure regional order through the selective provision of economic and security incentives, thereby advancing its geopolitical interests and those of its strategic partners.

However, the study also concludes that these diplomatic gains came at considerable political and normative costs. The Abraham Accords marginalised Palestinian national aspirations, weakened the prospects for a viable two-state solution, and undermined established principles of international law through unilateral policy decisions concerning Jerusalem, the Golan Heights, and Israeli settlements. By shifting emphasis from comprehensive conflict resolution to bilateral normalisation agreements, the Trump administration reduced the centrality of the Palestinian issue in regional diplomacy without addressing the

underlying causes of the conflict. Consequently, while the Accords contributed to short-term regional stability among participating states, they failed to establish the inclusive and legitimate framework necessary for sustainable peace, thereby reinforcing the argument that lasting conflict resolution in the Middle East requires diplomacy that balances strategic interests with justice, international legal norms, and the legitimate aspirations of all parties.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are suggested for this study:

1. The United States and other major international actors should adopt a more balanced and inclusive diplomatic approach by ensuring that future normalization initiatives incorporate meaningful negotiations on Palestinian statehood, territorial disputes, refugees, and the status of Jerusalem rather than treating these issues as secondary concerns.
2. Regional stakeholders, including Israel, Arab states, and the Palestinian leadership, should revive multilateral peace negotiations under internationally recognized frameworks such as the United Nations and relevant Security Council resolutions to strengthen the legitimacy and sustainability of future peace agreements.
3. Future U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East should align more closely with international law and established diplomatic norms,

avoiding unilateral actions that undermine the credibility of the United States as a neutral mediator and weaken confidence in the international rules-based order.

4. Scholars and policymakers should undertake further longitudinal research on the long-term consequences of the Abraham Accords, particularly their implications for regional security, Palestinian self-determination, U.S. influence in the Middle East, and the future viability of the two-state solution beyond the 2017–2021 study period.

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