

# Regional Cooperation in the Midst of Regional Conflagration: Examining the Partnership Agenda in the Shadow of October 7th

Nir Boms, Ahmed Khuzai'e & Louis Tuchman, Editors





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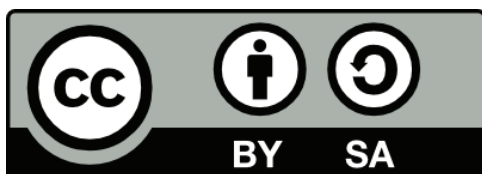
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# Introduction: Assessing Regionalism in the Midst of a Regional Crisis

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*Nir Boms, Ahmed Khuzai, Louis Tuchman*

In September of 2023, as the Abraham Accords reached their third anniversary, there was much to celebrate, at least in some parts of the Middle East. The historic economic and defense agreements signed between the member states began to show dividends, painting a picture of a more prosperous, peaceful, and stable region. In 2023, trade between Israel and the Abraham Accords nations exceeded \$4 billion USD. More notably, despite Israel's 12% decrease in total trade over the first 9-months of 2023, its trade with its Abraham Accords partners increased by over 24%.<sup>1</sup> The region saw further Arab-Israeli integration with the establishment of the Negev Forum and the "I2U2" UAE-US-Israel-India initiative, which have fostered collaboration in trade, diplomacy, defense, and energy. Although Saudi Arabia has not yet normalized relations with Israel, official visits and reports of advanced talks gave the impression that a deal was on the horizon. At the same time, Turkey, a member of NATO and a US ally, had begun to improve its relations with both Israel and the Gulf, marking a broader circle of regional alignment.

At the Moshe Dayan Center, and specifically in our Program for Regional Cooperation, our work began to reflect the sentiments of collaboration, integration, and connectivity felt in the region. The Center partnered with five institutions in the region to convene the first of a series of annual conferences exploring New Regionalism and the emerging agenda of partnership in the Middle East. These partnerships exemplified the new paradigm of regional dynamics, as our partners saw themselves as true stakeholders, investing both time and resources, a reality largely unachieved by previous Israeli-Arab partnerships in the region.

Immediately following the signing of the Abraham Accords, public sentiment towards Israel in the Gulf reached a peak. While there was widespread opposition to "normalization" across parts of the region, citizens in the UAE and Bahrain largely expressed

support for the new regional framework. The Accords not only facilitated government-to-government collaboration but also fostered closer people-to-people ties. Initiatives like the opening of the Abrahamic Family House, the influx of Israeli tourists to the Gulf, and emerging business ventures with Israeli companies further bolstered public backing. However, skepticism persisted as Gulf citizens awaited tangible benefits from the Accords, particularly in terms of positive outcomes for the Palestinians.

This progress, however, seemed to come to a tragic and sudden halt on October 7th, 2023, when the tension between brothers and cousins that always existed now moved to the streets. The heinous Hamas attacks and the Israeli military response shook the region, revealing several challenges yet to be properly addressed by the new regional paradigm. The region was once again consumed by the violence and destruction of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and the discourse was dominated by those who reject the trends of partnership, and promulgate hostility, terror, and hate, as well as support rogue resistance efforts throughout the region. Nevertheless, even within this new context, the regional arena and the partnership agenda had far from disappeared.

While many of the partnerships, particularly those related to civil society and people-to-people dynamics have scaled back significantly, it is evident that the region has been playing a growingly important role in managing the conflict. On the ground, diplomacy was operating in high gear as Israel's Abraham Accords partners were the first international allies to lead humanitarian efforts in Gaza, with the UAE opening a field hospital and providing significant humanitarian aid. The regional partners quickly became the main mediators and negotiators in the attempts to end the war, reach a ceasefire, and deal with the sensitive issues of hostages and captives. In an effort to prevent further

escalation and destruction, on April 14th, the US, Israel, and their Arab partners managed to successfully intercept 99% of a massive barrage of rockets and drones fired at Israel by Iran.

This publication, presented at the beginning of 2025, more than 15 months into the conflict, is an effort to examine the current state of the regional agenda on the background of the Gaza War, and the larger regional conflagration it has sparked. Recognizing that following the accords, regional dynamics became ever more relevant to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, this publication also attempts to analyze various efforts and initiatives regarding the rebuilding of Gaza. The articles in this publication envision a “day after” that will enable the region to again move away from conflict and towards connectivity.

In bringing together experts from across the region, including Israeli, Palestinian, Saudi, Emirati, and Bahraini contributors, we seek to explore what remains of the regional agenda and how it might contribute to drafting a “day after” plan that seeks to end the war in Gaza and restore a partnership agenda in the Middle East.

The publication touches on some of the key aspects at the core of the regional agenda:

Looking at the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Nir Boms (Israel) and Sarah Aweidah (PA) propose a new paradigm for discourse on a possible solution for the Israeli-Palestinian question. Through historical lenses, the article lays the groundwork for a 4.0 version of an Israeli and Palestinian future, further integrated with the moderate states of the region. As Israeli and Palestinian writers, they seek to chart a way forward that frames a possible joint vision for a “day after” that is based on new leadership, new beginnings, and new assumptions.

Examining education and its role in shaping the new era of regionalism, Eldad Pardo (Israel) and Najat al Said (Saudi/UAE), both analyze the region’s various textbooks and educational philosophies, examining how they contribute to the political agendas and visions of the states in question. Despite their different angles and perspectives, these two articles offer thoughts as to how the

educational systems, both in Gaza, and in the wider region, must be reformed and realigned with the trajectory of peace and coexistence in the context of “day after” plans.

In this conflict especially, the new age of social media has had a tremendous impact on the narratives and perceptions of the war, many of them challenging the assumptions of the partnership agenda. Mohammed Al Sayed (Bahrain) looks at both traditional media and social media in the Arabic language, examining how organizations, influencers, and other social media trends have shaped the discourse surrounding the war.

Economy and trade has been a core component of the agenda. Josh Krasna (Israel) examines the economic progression which, although showing significant bilateral progress, had thus far failed to rise to the challenge of “regionalism” and produce multi-state collaborations, despite those being planned. This angle points on a weakness in the regionalism framework that has not yet reached real ripeness.

Discussions for Saudi-Israel normalization had been the most significant development of the new partnership agenda in the Middle East in the period before October 7th. Mujtaba Isani (Saudi/Pakistani) analyzes the Saudi response to the reemergence of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and its ramifications on the Saudi approach to cooperation with Israel.

Building on the historic insights of Ibn Khaldun, Einat Levi (Israel) presents a new model of “City Diplomacy” as a potential key to future progress within the framework of regionalism. She examines Abu Dhabi, Haifa, and Essaouira as symbols of engagement rooted in more stable foundations, resilient to national-level conflicts, and potentially beneficial for discussions regarding the reintegration of Gaza into the region.

Nir Boms and Stephen Cohen analyze the recent events in Syria following Bashar Al-Assad’s departure from Damascus on December 7th. While the idea of building a new “Syrian national project” based on a power sharing model which considers the interests and concerns of Syria’s diverse groups would be supportive to the regional partnership agenda, the feasibility of such a project is quite

low. Recent events have shown that Syria may once again spiral into further division and conflict. Nevertheless, opportunities for cooperation and positive connectivity with the moderate forces should be utilized as Syria charts its new trajectory.

As we write these lines, the first stage of cease-fire and hostage deal is taking shape in Gaza. Yet, the regional war continues to rage. In a lightning offensive, Syrian rebels led by Ahmed al-Sharaa of Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham, captured Damascus in under two weeks and toppled the Assad regime. As the events in Syria continue to unfold and the leaders of the rebellion chart a new trajectory for Syria's political reality, many challenges and opportunities will be presented to the regional agenda. It is clear that the changing power dynamics in the region, most notably the weakening of the Iranian axis, played a significant role in the success of the uprising. While it may be hard to say that the agenda of connectivity is prevailing, a closer look shows that opportunities exist here as well.

If you look beyond the fog of war, one could argue that the trajectory of regional connectivity and integration is progressing just as rapidly, if not faster than it was previously, driven by the urgent need to contain the ongoing conflict. This was the case in April and again in September, when the

region found itself working together to foil Iranian attacks on Israel. This is also evident in the fact that flights from Israel to the Gulf are among the few still operating, even as all other international airlines have ceased flying to Ben Gurion Airport. As the authors have argued in the pages that follow, an ambitious agenda that focuses on education, economy, and regional partnership is still at play even amidst one of the lowest points of conflict in the region. While the moment in the region reflects a growing conflagration, it is important to note that the partnership agenda is still at work, seeking a path for a better "day after."

We would like to express our heartfelt gratitude to our partners at the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, notably Keren Adatto and Michael Rimmel, for all of your help at every stage of the process.

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Yours,

Nir Boms, Ahmed Khuzaiie, Louis Tuchman

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# New Syria in the Making – Challenges and Opportunities for Israel

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## Abstract:

The Hay'at Tahri al-Sham (HTS) surprise attack that began on November 27th and took Damascus in less than two weeks, caught many by surprise, including President Bashar al Assad, who fled the city on December 7th. Ahmed ah-Sharaa, aka Mohammad al-Joulani, the leader of HTS, has expressed pragmatism thus far as he seeks to build a “new Syria”; an inclusive Syrian National Project that aims to guarantee the rights of Syria’s diverse ethnic and ideological groups. While this new vision is in sync with the moderate regional partners, the challenge is enormous. Success requires a power-sharing model to win the support of most Syrians. While not everyone is willing to share power, and many question the leadership of a former Jihadi backed by Islamists, now is the time to engage with those working to forge a new and different future for Syria.

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The Turkish interest in Damascus, and the region at large, goes back centuries. In the 16th century, Sultan Selim used his relatively short reign to significantly expand the territory of the Ottoman Empire. In 1516, Sultan Selim I conquered Syria at the end of a swift campaign. Selim I then threw his forces southward in the Ottoman–Mamluk War, and defeated the Mamluks in Syria. Syria would remain in Ottoman possession for four hundred years. He entered Damascus in October 1517 and continued to Egypt. Although white Toyota pickups were unavailable at the time, his swift victory was achieved partially thanks to his artillery.<sup>1</sup> Selim I conquered the Mamluk Sultanate of Egypt, expanding the empire from Syria and Palestine to Hejaz and Tihamah in the Arabian Peninsula. Five hundred years later, and about a century following the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, it appears that Damascus may again be in the hands of the (Neo)-Ottomans, or at least what seems to be a Neo-Ottoman proxy. Turkey has already promised to build five military bases in Syria and assist in the

development of the new Syrian army. Is this the beginning of a new Pax-Ottomana in the Middle East? Or might this be another short chapter in the bloody Syrian conflict? More importantly, what are the ramifications of these new dynamics to Syria and Israel, as well as the regional agenda?

The HTS surprise attack that began on November 27th and that had taken Damascus in less than two weeks caught many by surprise, including President Bashar al Assad, who fled the city on December 7th. Syria, still fractured and struggling to recover from the “Syrian Spring” that devolved into a civil, proxy, and interregional war, now has a new ruler seated at Mt. Mezze Palace in Damascus. Nevertheless, the old problems still remain.

Ahmed ah-Sharaa, aka Mohammad al-Joulani, has taken a pragmatic approach thus far. He has commented on the vision of the new Syrian project: “The Syrian population has lived together for thousands of years.”<sup>2</sup> Moreover, “we will have dialogue

and ensure everyone is represented.” “The old regime always played with sectarian divisions, he added, “but we will not... I think the revolution can contain everybody.” These ideas are pivotal for the success of a possible Syrian National Project that Mr. ah-Sharaa seeks to create. However, they also hint at the challenge that lies ahead of bringing a divided country, still not recovered from a sectarian war, together.

## Between Old Syrian Divisions and a New Syrian Project

Syria is home to a mosaic of ethnic groups, with most of the population being Arab and Sunni. These groups comprised over 70% of the country’s pre-war population. In addition to Arabs, Syria has significant Kurdish, Armenian, and Assyrian populations. The Kurds, primarily in the northeastern regions, have distinct languages and cultures and have used the vacuum created by war to further establish their autonomy in northeastern Syria, where a de-facto Kurdish enclave was created. The Armenian community, many of whom are descendants of survivors of the Armenian Genocide, is concentrated in several urban centers. Assyrians, an ancient ethnic group, also have a presence, particularly in the northeast. Other minorities, such as Alawites, Druze, and Turkmen, further add to the country’s ethnic complexity. Under the Assad regime, the Alawites, comprising roughly 12% of the pre-war population, aligned with other minority groups, recognizing the need for allies to maintain control over the Arab Sunni majority. Twelve years of war have changed the demographic composition of Syria. The majority of those killed – over 600,000 according to most estimates and close to a million according to some – in the rebellion were Sunni Arabs.<sup>3</sup> The same applies to the number of refugees who left Syria, which is estimated to be between 6-7 million out of the 23 million pre-war population.<sup>4</sup>

Unfortunately, Syria’s divisions do not end with ethnic or religious tensions. The conflict, an all-out, civil, ethnic, and proxy war that has tarnished Syria since 2012, created additional divisions that manifested in new armed groups with local, regional,

or ideological agendas. At the peak of the war, estimates counted more than 1,000 local armed groups throughout the country with over 100,000 armed rebels (separate from the 200,000 soldiers of the pre-war Syrian military).<sup>5</sup> While most ethnic groups, specifically the Kurds, the Druze, and the Alawites (who until recently controlled the Syrian military) have significant fighting forces, other forces exist on the ground as well. Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, the Turkey-backed Islamic group that has taken Damascus and formed a new government, was formed in 2017. The group is a merger between several armed factions such as Jaysh al-Ahrar, Jabhat Fateh al-Sham (JFS), Ansar al-Din Front, Jaysh al-Sunna, Liwa al-Haqq, and others. This is not a unitary military force, and its commander, Ahmed ah-Sharaa, will need to work hard to make sure that he has control not only of his own men, but also of the hundreds of other local militias who still hold weapons in Syria.

## A Regional Outlook

Moderates in the region who have worked in the past few years to bring Assad closer to the Arab fold, have largely welcomed the transition in Syria, despite having some reservations about the dominance of the Qatari-Turkish axis that has replaced the Russian-Iranian one. Following the years of war, in which the Arab league recognized the rebels as the representatives of Syria, the Arab world gradually began to accept the failure of the revolution and recognized Assad as the de facto leader of Syria. The UAE led this process. It opened its embassy in Damascus in 2018 and invited Assad for an official visit in 2022. Assad was welcomed back to the Arab League in 2023 following a decade of absence, and even the Saudis opened an embassy in Damascus in 2024. Qatar was the last to join, and announced the opening of its own embassy this past December, only after Assad’s defeat (and just to add to their hedging, Khalifa Abdullah Al Mahmoud Al-Sharif, brother of the Qatari ambassador to Iran, was appointed as the ambassador). Bringing Assad closer to the Arab league, or having him removed from power, serves a similar objective; the weakening of the Iranian axis which continues to cause tension in the Gulf. Ahmed ah-Sharaa already flirted with Saudi saying, “I am proud of

everything Saudi Arabia has done for Syria, and it has a major role in the country's future."<sup>6</sup> Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain, and Oman have all resumed their diplomatic activity and endorsed the transitional government.

Qatar's first commercial flight to Damascus in 13 years landed on January 7, 2025. This comes amidst initial reports about Qatar's willingness to invest in Syria's energy infrastructure and ports, as well as to support the rebuilding of Damascus's international airport.<sup>7</sup> Despite the current state of carnage in Syria, a stable Syria opens the door to a number of regional endeavors, placing Syria as a commercial hub between Europe, Turkey, and the Gulf, with effects that can positively impact Israel's economy as well. Plans for an overland trade route from Turkey and the Port of Haifa are now more plausible. There is also talk of potentially connecting the existing Arab Gas Pipeline to the developing Eastern Mediterranean LNG pipeline that connects Israel, Egypt, Cyprus and Greece.

Nevertheless, officials in the Gulf are hesitant to throw all of their support behind ah-Sharaa. Anwar Gargash, senior diplomatic advisor to the President of the UAE has said, "We don't know about the shape of developments in Syria. Is this going to be a sort of a wiser group that will be able to actually transcend, as I mentioned, Syria's tortured history, or are we going to go back into a reincarnation of radical and terrorist organizations playing a role."<sup>8</sup> The potential strengthening of more emboldened Muslim Brotherhood actors, considering the origin of HTS, is a red-flag to the moderate countries of the Gulf, who already banned the Muslim Brotherhood as a terrorist organization in 2013 and 2014.

## A New Syrian National Project

The vision of a Syrian National Project—a sovereign country that provides a safe home for its diverse ethnic, religious, and ideological groups—is ah-Sharaa's key proposition. He has made a point to meet the leaders of Syria's ethnic and religious communities, as well as to engage with the armed groups which he believes should join the new Syrian army. He speaks softly and is careful not to comment on the Levant or the Umma, but rather

about the more modest and peaceful Syria that he seeks to create. Nevertheless, his vision is not shared by all.

In a recent party speech, Turkish President Erdoğan talked openly about his ambitions to revise the outcome of World War I and annex Syrian territories (formerly Ottoman provinces) into Turkey. Contrary to Western Europe, where a post-modern and post-nationalist approach is still dominating the elite mindset, the rest of the world is moving on to a neo-imperialist mindset.

Turkey supports and trains the Syrian National Army (Jaish al-Watani), which is an offshoot of the Free Syrian Army that began its activities in Syria in 2017.<sup>9</sup> This faction consists of over 30 armed groups that do not necessarily operate under a unified command, but still operate under a broad mission of regaining their country which, from a Turkish perspective, means to fight against the Kurds. Other factions of the Free Syrian Army, mainly secular groups that rejected Turkish patronage, are spread throughout Syria and beyond, receiving support from various parties, including the United States and Gulf nations. The statement released on December 24th regarding an agreement between the leaders of former rebel factions to consolidate all groups under a new Syrian Defense Ministry is undoubtedly promising, but also revealing. Many armed groups have resisted surrendering their weapons due to ideological differences or fear for their safety.<sup>10</sup> Some of these groups are aligned with political factions that do not recognize the ah-Sharaa-led Syrian National Project. The recent armed clashes in Syria reflect both the challenges and dangers that lie ahead. If the Syrian National Project fails, or if a formula cannot be developed to unite the diverse minorities into an effective power-sharing arrangement, Syria will face further fragmentation. This could lead to the continuation of violence and ultimately threaten to plunge the country back into turmoil.

In 1918, German sociologist Max Weber defined the state as a "human community that (successfully) claims the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force within a given territory."<sup>11</sup> State monopoly on violence is widely regarded as a defining characteristic of the modern state.<sup>12</sup> It has been

reported that the new Syrian government aspires to form a 300,000-strong army with the help of Turkey within a year and a half, with Turkish military advisors playing a central role. Turkish Armed Forces personnel will oversee the process at five strategic locations.<sup>13</sup> While Syria's new rulers have called for the disbanding of all armed groups, few have adhered to the challenge. The fighters from the Druze religious minority say they prefer to rely on their own men, rather than the promises made by Syria's transitional authorities.<sup>14</sup> The Kurds, and especially the secular groups once formally backed by the West, will be the least likely to trust a Turkish-backed effort.

Regarding the rights of minorities, one must investigate the nominations in the transitional government. On December 20th, Syria's transitional government (Political Affairs Department of the Syrian Salvation Government (SSG)), announced a series of governmental appointments. One of the appointments was Aisha Al-Debs as head of the Office for Women's Affairs, which oversees judicial, social, cultural, and political affairs affecting the women of Syria. Her appointment appears to be an attempt to allay the concerns of HTS opponents regarding the status of women under the new regime. However, her views on women's status and role in society pose a challenge regarding inclusive frameworks. Al-Debs, born in Damascus, wears a hijab and comes from a religious family. Furthermore, she has expressed extremist views, praised terrorism, and criticized the United States and the moderate Arab regimes. She has voiced support for Hamas and its military wing, mourned the death of its leaders, and praised the October 7th Hamas-led attack and atrocities in southern Israel, calling the attack "the king of Arab Spring revolts."<sup>15</sup>

## Challenges and Opportunities for Israel

In the short term, Israel has gained from these rapid changes, as the new Sunni-Turkish-led camp has made it a priority to push the Iranian Shi'a axis out of Syria. The power vacuum left by the expulsion of the Shi'a axis, however, might now be filled by Turkey and Qatar, and made up of a Muslim

Brotherhood alliance, whose affiliates also won 22% of the votes in the Jordanian elections last September. The Jihadi past and Islamist affiliations of Mr. al-Sharaa and some of his appointed figures, such as Anas Khattab, who also appears on the American Terror list due to his links with ISIS under Abu Musab al Zarqawi do not ease Israeli concerns. This uncertainty and unease is reflected in the IDF's activities in the buffer zone (UNDOF AOS) situated in Syria's Golan Heights plateau it controls.<sup>16</sup>

PM Netanyahu declared that "we have no intention of interfering in Syria's internal affairs, but we intend to do what is necessary to ensure our security," and added that he authorized the Air Force to "bomb strategic military capabilities left behind by the Syrian army so that they would not fall into the hands of the jihadist."<sup>17</sup>

While the IDF continues to bomb Syria even a month after al-Sharaa took over most of Syria, this should indeed be seen as a temporary move. The IDF's activities in Syria do not address the pivotal policy questions Israel must consider when it comes to Syria. While the use of military force might resolve immediate security concerns, long-term prospects for relations require consideration of other policy options.<sup>18</sup> The current Israeli presence in Syria, already viewed as an "occupation," triggered demonstrations against Israel. The death of unarmed Syrian civilians as a result of Israeli strikes has caused many to further challenge Israel's response in Syria.<sup>19</sup> At the start of HTS's offensive in Syria, Israel was far from the focus of the new Syrian dynamic. However, continued Israeli activity in the Golan Heights might have the opposite effect, and instead galvanize Syrian frustration and anger against Israel.

Other vectors will likely be influencing Israel's policy moves in Syria: US policy under incoming president Trump in Syria and the region, the strength of the ceasefire with Hezbollah in Lebanon, and the impact, if at all, the Syrian developments will have on the domestic arenas of Lebanon and Jordan.

Still, Israel has a good reason to support the vision of the New Syrian National Project and give its neighbor a chance. A Syria that respects the rights of its minorities is likely to respect the rights of

its neighbors, which presents an opportunity to create a new trajectory of relations between the two countries. A Syria that will be embraced by moderate partners in the region and that is keen to stay away from Iran is certainly one that Israel should support.

Israel has already demonstrated that it can offer a different model of engagement. Between 2013 and 2018, Israel successfully led humanitarian operations, establishing 15 clinics and two hospitals on the Syrian side of the border, which served over 1.5 million Syrians. It is not out of the question that Israel could reopen its borders as a gesture of goodwill, in a coordinated effort that could pave the way for a more positive future.

In the same vein, Israel should prepare for the possibility that the Syrian National Project may fail, leading to Syria becoming effectively divided once again. Israel should remain engaged with the

communities in southern Syria, which may become increasingly significant if Damascus loses control over the border area again. While Israel needs to be cautious about taking sides in the internal Syrian conflict, it should continue to extend its hand to the Syrian factions that believe this is a pivotal moment to reshape both countries' relations and establish a framework for cooperation.

Syria, once a cornerstone of the Middle East, has been left in turmoil since the outbreak of civil war in 2012. The nation is now fragmented, with large parts lying in ruins and its economy in shambles. Regional players, including Israel, should shift their focus from the Syria that once was to the New Syrian Project that is hopefully beginning to emerge. It may be time for Israel to change its narrative and support the rise of a new Syrian nation, not as a platform for targets, but as a beacon of potential and possibilities.

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# Version 4.0: A New Regional Paradigm for Israelis and Palestinians

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## Abstract:

Amidst a bloody war and the tragic course of events since October 7th, Israelis and Palestinians require a profound process of introspection, asking difficult questions about the possibility of building an alternative future at a time when prospects for progress appear far from reach. This article offers a historical conceptualization of two societies who have reached a critical juncture while offering a framework for a way forward that seeks to break the current impasse. The piece concludes with a focus on the future of Gaza as it delineates a possible route of progress in the century-old conflict between Israelis and Palestinians. The vision suggested is one of integration within the pragmatic camp of the region, which offers economic connectivity, a revitalized identity, and a path towards a new political horizon. While it's difficult to see a light at the end of this tunnel, the authors believe that this tragic moment offers a rare opportunity for progress for the Palestinians, as well for the prospects of regional cooperation and normalization.

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We write amidst one of the darkest periods in the history of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, set against the backdrop of another tragic war in Gaza, which began after Hamas' unprecedented attack on October 7th. The unparalleled destruction on both sides has devastated both societies. The mass killing of innocent civilians and the taking of hostages shocked Israelis, shattering a perception of invincibility and disrupting national unity. For the Palestinians, this war has seen more casualties than in all previous rounds of fighting over the last 75 years.<sup>1</sup> As individuals who have been deeply involved in the painstaking work of building bridges between both of our societies, we find ourselves frustrated, sad, and angry as we face the difficult horrors of war. Nevertheless, we also see an opportunity to turn this tragedy into a new path of hope.

On October 7th, Israel endured the largest massacre of Jewish people since the Holocaust. Now,

the country must grapple with the aftermath of an intelligence failure of catastrophic proportions. While the first months of this war brought Israelis together, after more than a year, the country is again divided as it debates its own political future.

At the same time, caught in the crossfire in Gaza amidst Israeli bombings and internal Hamas strife, Palestinians are now confronted with an imperative for decisive action, though with little leverage to do so. The options available to the Palestinians are constrained by the absence of a ceasefire, regional escalation, and the uncertainty surrounding the post-war landscape. The leadership challenge and looming political void that marks the end of the Abu Mazin era further complicates the Palestinian predicament.

The Arab nations, torn between sympathy for the cause and fear of further escalation, are again

summoned to assume a mediating role, provide aid, and contribute to covering the bill for reconstruction despite their own numerous internal challenges.

In recent years, and until October 7th, the region was moving towards a robust path of progress and connectivity, much buoyed by the Abraham Accords. In the past year, however, the region once again finds itself consumed by the familiar destructive dynamics of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict that again fill the media discourse, the campus quads, and the corridors of the UN and the Hague. While the fighting continues in Gaza, the conflagration has expanded to Lebanon, Syria, Yemen, Iran, and the Red Sea, while simultaneously fueling a title wave of hate, antisemitism, and anger around the world.

It is clear that a new “operating system” is desperately needed. Both sides must engage in a process of introspection for there to be any hope of changing the trajectory of the conflict that has engulfed our nations for more than 75 years. In this paper, we will examine the past in order to frame the shared future we envision for our two nations.

Israel 1.0 was conceived in 1948. The Jews settled the land and began to construct state infrastructure that came to fruition after the conclusion of the British mandate and a war of independence with the Arabs, who refused to accept a partition plan for a two-state solution. With barely 600,000 Jews in 1948, Israel was a small nation, often perceived as David among the colossal Goliaths surrounding it. Marked by a socialist orientation and grappling with the trauma of both the Holocaust and the deportation of 800,000 Jews from their homes in Arab lands, Israel was finding its way, seeking refuge behind the major powers at the time. The young country made its first steps in the international arena and worked to create relations with the non-Arab players in the region. In turn, Turkey and Iran became its most trusted allies.

Version 2.0 was born in 1967. After six days of war, Israel almost tripled its territory and prevailed over three Arab armies. Gaza was separated from Egypt, the West Bank from Jordan, and the Golan from Syria. Israeli generals became the heroes

of the nation, both in Israel and abroad. Israelis and Jews had gained their pride, but this came at a price. Israel had tripled its land but also added over 1,000,000 Palestinians to its midst. Hubris and a sense of invincibility eventually led to Israel's most difficult moment. The war of 1973, which began as a coordinated surprise attack on Israel's Day of Atonement. The most significant religious holiday of the year quickly became a terribly bloody campaign. Despite its win, Israel underwent a profound process of introspection that resulted from the realization that their own perceptions blinded the leadership of the time. A 'Commission of Inquiry' explored the failures and forced a process of accountability.

The war and its aftermath led to a fundamental change in the country's politics and leadership. Israel upgraded its operating system, and version 3.0 was born. Israel changed its leadership, sending the Labor Party and the Socialists home, and elected Likud, the right-of-center party, for the very first time in Israel's history. Israel discovered that it was not alone in the world, and a new era of peace began with Egypt in 1979. Jordan followed, and so did the Palestinians (although not with much success) and eventually the Arab world with the Abraham Accords. Israel continued to innovate and became a “start-up nation,” creating the strongest economy in the region. The Palestinian conflict remained central, accompanied by the first and second Intifada and subsequent rounds of negotiations that led to little progress. Many in Israel had lost hope in a peaceful solution and, especially following the Abraham Accords, adopted a new hope that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict could be pushed to the side while Israel found new friends in the region. They were wrong.

Almost exactly fifty years after the 1973 war, Israel experienced another surprise attack on October 7th that was related to hubris. At a time of deep division, preoccupied with internal strife, Israeli leadership again failed to understand the threats upon its borders and failed to listen to those who saw the looming danger ahead. Similarly to 1973, it is clear that many of the signs were already apparent and that some at the helm had decided not to heed those who raised the alarm bells. Just as in the aftermath of the Yom Kippur war, a new gen-



eration of leaders will need to emerge in order for Israel 4.0 to emerge.

Version 1.0 of the Arab State that was supposed to be Palestine was also conceived in 1948, after the United Nations adopted the original two-state solution framework from 1947 (UN Resolution 181). The Arabs were given a state, but Arab leaders decided to reject the agreement and pursue the War of Independence, called the Nakba (“catastrophe”) by Palestinians. For most Palestinians, the Nakba represents a traumatic period marked by forced displacement and the loss of homes, land, and livelihoods. The Palestinians found themselves dispersed between Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria, and it took quite some time for new leadership to emerge at the end of the 1950s. In 1964, the Palestinian Liberation Organization was established under the leadership of Yasser Arafat with the goal of representing the Palestinian people and their national aspirations. In 1967, the Six-Day War once again brought substantial territorial changes, as Israel gained control of Gaza and the West Bank, which were previously administered by Egypt and Jordan, respectively. Two decades later, the first Intifada began, resulting in a process of negotiation with Israel to establish a Palestinian state.

In 1993, a new chapter in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict unfolded with the emergence of the Palestinian Authority, or version 2.0. This era was marked by significant developments, driven primarily by the Oslo Accords and Arafat’s return to Gaza after 27 years of exile, symbolizing a potential shift towards peace. However, the path towards peace proved challenging. With difficulties in implementing the agreement, the region experienced a renewed wave of violence, shattering hopes for a stable resolution to the longstanding conflict. Amidst these challenges, a significant turning point occurred in 2006 when Hamas, a Palestinian political and militant group, won the elections for the Palestinian Legislative Council in Gaza. This victory came shortly after Israel’s unilateral withdrawal from the region, adding complexity to the evolving political landscape. The following year saw dramatic escalation as internal tensions between Fatah, the political party associated with the PA, and Hamas reached a boiling point. There are different perspectives regarding the circumstances

that led to this internal strife, but the situation culminated in Hamas’s forceful takeover of Gaza. While the events surrounding Hamas’s control of Gaza in 2007 remain a subject of contention, all can agree that the consequences of Hamas’ takeover of Gaza were profound, establishing a new political reality which we will call version 3.0.

As clearly demonstrated on October 7th, Hamas focused its energy and resources on building its terror capabilities, joining the axis of resistance, and neglecting the well-being and prosperity of the people of Gaza. Meanwhile, in the West Bank, the PA has deteriorated and is losing the support of its constituents. Against the backdrop of mounting frustration, a lack of visible political progress, and a leadership perceived as weak and divided, a recent survey revealed intriguing insights into Palestinian sentiments. In this survey, over 70% of respondents expressed a desire for alternative avenues of representation, endorsing the formation of independent groups in the West Bank distinct from the Palestinian Authority (PA).<sup>2</sup>

And that was all before October 7th, a watershed event that has already captured much of the region, threatening a regional conflagration and extending its influence to global capitals. After more than a year of fighting, it is evident that this struggle once again risks trapping the entire region within the grip of Israeli-Palestinian tensions.

As we begin to look forward, especially for those of us who refuse to lose hope in the Middle East, it is essential to think about a “day after” reality that will change the course of events between Israelis and Palestinians. This low point is perhaps the moment for Israelis and Palestinians to create a new “operating system,” version 4.0, that will function shortly after this war subsides.

It appears that substantive change in Israeli policies will remain elusive as long as the Palestinian version 3.0 continues to dictate the operational landscape. An Israeli consensus exists around the fact that there is a lack of Palestinian leadership that could offer a meaningful partner for the future. On the other hand, Palestinians argue that true partnership and a road to just and lasting peace requires addressing the root causes of the

conflict, including the occupation and settlement expansion.

It has become clear that neither Hamas nor the PA were able to advance the Palestinian agenda. Hamas took over the very first independent Palestinian land and established a Palestinian polity that should have been a Singapore, not an Afghanistan. Despite significant international aid, Gaza produces a Real GDP per capita of \$5,300, with the majority of investment going to military structures, rather than to the benefit of the population.<sup>3</sup> The situation in the West Bank is equally challenging, with a proliferation of militant groups growing in response to perceived leadership shortcomings and persistent violence from settlers and the Israeli army.

The international community has expressed hesitations regarding investing in rebuilding efforts without a sustainable resolution that will prevent the recurrence of conflict.<sup>4</sup> The reluctance stems from the concern that investing in reconstruction might be futile if the region remains susceptible to future disputes. Hence, the imperative for a comprehensive solution—a 4.0 version—that addresses the root causes of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and seeks to build a stable foundation for reconstruction, development, and lasting peace is clear.

## How Do We Get There?

While efforts to implement a ceasefire continue, it is becoming clear that a much larger objective must be pursued, with the help and involvement of partners in the region and beyond. Efforts are being made to maintain peace and prevent escalation into a broader conflict. However, it is important to note that Israel's parliament has passed a resolution rejecting a two-state solution and declaring the establishment of a Palestinian state as "an existential danger to the state of Israel." This Knesset motion, which holds no legal weight, was passed with 68 votes in favor and nine against.

While in Israel, the process of introspection has already begun with the resignation of some of those responsible for the failure of October 7th, a similar objective must be pursued on the Palestin-

ian side. New faces of hope are desperately needed on both sides. Support from the Emirates, Saudi Arabia, and other nations is crucial to endorse an independent Palestinian leadership team that could revive a different and constructive political process. New Palestinian leadership will play a pivotal role toward the beginning of a new process of partnership building and negotiations. The new leadership must come largely outside of existing structures, namely Hamas and the PA, aiming for independence and detachment from previously unsuccessful frameworks.

In the second phase, we call for establishing a trusteeship or a capacity-building Arab-Palestinian commission that will function as a transitional authority to the next phase. This commission will be vital in coordinating international efforts aimed at reconstructing civilian life in the Gaza Strip, as well as social reform, education and deradicalization. A thorough review of the progress achieved by the commission should be conducted within a five-year timeframe, at which point the involved stakeholders can decide whether to extend its mission for an additional term.

In the third phase, predicated on the success of the new Palestinian governing structure and polity, negotiations will resume so that such a polity could exist peacefully alongside Israel and other regional neighbors. This phase will also address the advancement of more constructive and peaceful relations between Israel and the future Palestinian entity.

Central to this strategy is the phased establishment of a new Palestinian leadership independent of existing structures (i.e., Hamas and the PA). Initiatives are underway, with prominent Palestinians engaging in discussions with Gulf partners and international stakeholders, signaling a concerted effort to foster meaningful change from within Palestinian society.

## Gaza, a Tragic Opportunity for a Pilot

The carnage and tragedy of Gaza may still enable a needed first step in the build-up of a Palestin-

ian political alternative. The leadership vacuum in Gaza, the Israeli security concerns, and the visible weakness of the PA all call for an arrangement of an external team, backed by regional and international partners, which will play a significant role in the post-war period in Gaza. It is essential that this team be composed primarily by Palestinians who understand the local context and challenges. This approach will not only leverage local expertise and knowledge, but also empower the Palestinian community in the reconstruction process.

Following a desperately needed ceasefire to address the current humanitarian crisis, the Palestinians in Gaza will need a governance team that will enable them to break away from the destructive path of conflict it experienced for so many years prior. While Israel, who paid its own steep price for this war, will not relinquish control easily, it will likely be open to exploring scenarios that could serve as an alternative to taking full responsibility for civilian life in Gaza. Israel's lack of trust in the PA, along with the opportunity to create further normalization in the region, furthers the push for a team of experts or an external commission to be appointed to help manage the "Day After" project in Gaza. Such an approach could align with Israeli interests by providing perhaps the only feasible alternative to the reality of a full-scale Israeli occupation in Gaza. While Israel will not agree to give up security control, it will likely be more open to accepting a more significant involvement of others in civilian affairs and, overall, in the broader restructuring process. Successful progress in these areas could help plant the needed seeds for a future Israeli acceptance of a Palestinian polity.

On the flip side, this approach could also align with Palestinian interests, as it becomes increasingly evident that there is currently no structure capable of gaining legitimacy and effectively implementing a successful "Day After" project. Moreover, the imperative for regional and international support is paramount in facilitating the implementation of any such plan. Stakeholders within the region – such as Saudi Arabia, the UAE or Egypt – and beyond, who are eager to halt the ongoing conflict and chart an alternative political course, recognize the necessity of establishing a mechanism that can satisfy both Israelis and Palestinians. The Abra-

ham Accords themselves were signed on the background of moderating the tensions on the Israeli-Palestinian front, and the impending Saudi-Israeli conversations are also predicated on progress in this arena. More broadly, the moderate partners in the region see the link between progress in the Israeli-Palestinian track and the weakening of the radical influences in the region. These stakeholders acknowledge that the PA lacks the capacity to lead such a process, and that Israel is unlikely to relinquish its de facto occupation of Gaza without a viable alternative path supported by its allies. These realities heighten the prospects of establishing an external mechanism, which would leverage the increasing involvement of certain regional partners in the Palestinian issue. While the regional partners and stakeholders have a vested interest in de-escalation and finding a possible end to the conflict, they are also hesitant to move in a way that will bring them into the "line of fire." In other words, the MENA partners might be convinced that they are part of the solution as long as the suggested path does not pull them into the conflict itself, empowers the Palestinian people, and shows strong promise to succeed. The push for this path should come not only from the Israel and the Palestinians but also, and perhaps even more so, from other stakeholders such as the incoming US administration that could use its leverage to push a path of deconfliction and negotiation.

This external team that can come in the form of an ITA, an International Transition Authority, may provide the necessary environment for the emergence and empowerment of alternative Palestinian leadership at the local level, gradually garnering legitimacy within Palestinian society and the broader region, as well as Israel.<sup>5</sup> The ITA, which will rely on the support of countries like the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt, will be tasked with a mandate for managing the post-war Gaza and developing a transitional mechanism towards the possible "version 4.0" described. Considering the extent of the destruction along with the preceding years of isolation and lack of integration under Hamas, the transition team will need to gradually build and empower a new societal mindset in Gaza, one that is accepting of all players in the region. Specifically, they will be tasked with the restructuring of political, civic, and educational institutions, the

empowerment of moderate leadership, and the development of a prosperous economy.

If the conflict is to be resolved, the vision is to create a sustainable framework that sets the stage for peaceful negotiations and coexistence of Palestinians and Israelis contingent on the success of the new governing structure. This comprehensive strategy aims to instill hope and foster stability in the region while tackling the longstanding challenges of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Though envisioning a positive future amidst the current bleak circumstances may seem daunting, we firmly believe these ideas warrant consider-

ation. It should offer a new path to reconstruction so that resources will finally be used for developing the infrastructure needed for the future.

Three decades have passed since the Oslo Accords, marking an old paradigm that yielded primarily conflict, deprivation, and failed Palestinian leadership. The results of which have been a fractured Palestinian community and the tragic situation in Gaza. It is imperative to discard this outdated model. Now is the time for a new regional paradigm and a new beginning, for both Palestinians and Israelis alike, as well as all of those in our region that cares for a better and safer future.

1 It is difficult to pinpoint precise figures on the number of Palestinians killed as a result of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, but there are estimates produced by the United Nations (OCHA), various historians who have studied specific periods and wars, and human rights organizations who routinely report casualty numbers. The conflict arenas themselves pose a challenge in this context, and here, for example, we can see very different estimates of the number of Palestinians killed in Lebanon by Israel in the first and subsequent Lebanon war. However, several different estimates point to close to 30,000 Palestinian fatalities since 1948 and until October 7th, 2023. In the year since the beginning of the Iron Sword War, most estimates show a higher number of Palestinian fatalities, without getting into the equally difficult debate over the number of combatant fatalities versus civilian casualties. Sources for this topic: , OnWar.com, Gabriel, Richard, A, Operation Peace for Galilee, The Israeli-PLO War in Lebanon, New York: Hill & Wang.

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# The Abrahamic Discourse, The Day After, and the Future of Education

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## Abstract:

Much has been written by Muslim and non-Muslim scholars relating to the question of Islam and modernity. In his work *The Arab Predicament*, Fouad Ajami notes that, “the revolt of Islam becomes a revolt against modernity,” which helps to explain the growing tide of Islamic radicalism and insularism that departed from the Islamic Golden Age.<sup>1</sup> Faced with the horrors of the October 7th attack and its aftermath, on top of the frequent waves of violence, death, and abysmal misery in the region we must ask again, “what went wrong?” Focusing on curricula, we will demonstrate that the educational curricula and message in the region have largely failed to offer a convincing vision of peace and prosperity, allowing hate, incitement, and narrow-mindedness to spread. Unfortunately, Palestinian education has been at the forefront of this challenge. However, the few cases of educational success serve as a positive foundation to build upon. We will argue that education drawing on the Abrahamic discourse – one we will call “pan-Abrahamism” – remains our best hope for meaningful change, peace, and prosperity in the region.

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## Quo Vadis Palestinian Education?

In the late 1990s, the first original Palestinian textbooks were introduced to replace the outdated and negative Jordanian and Egyptian textbooks. These textbooks were published without the partial “cleansing” of inciting material by the Israeli authorities (1967–1994). With the help of Palestinians in the diaspora, leaders of the budding Palestinian nation worked to fashion a democratic national identity. To do this, they attempted to impart the values of peace and civil rights through their new textbooks. Unfortunately, and consistently with Palestinian history, these moderates lost to more radical factions within the Palestinian camp. New Grade 1–10 textbooks, issued under PLO leader Yaser Arafat between 2000–2004, were committed to the PLO’s decades-old rejectionist-revolutionary culture. The death of Arafat in November 2004 and the election of Mahmoud Abbas as President of the Palestinian Authority revived hopes for improve-

ment. Indeed, new textbooks for Grade 11 featured a shift in tone for the better. For the first time, the name Israel appeared on two maps, albeit in a negative context.<sup>2</sup> A change for the worse, however, soon followed, with the victory of Hamas in the 2006 Palestinian general elections, which led to the publication of more radical textbooks.<sup>3</sup>

For almost two decades, the Palestinian polity has been divided between Fatah ruling parts of the West Bank and Hamas ruling the Gaza Strip. The curriculum of these two territories, however, has remained unified. UNRWA is active in both territories as well, teaching the same radical curriculum, which contains two versions of rejectionism: both secular and Islamist. A new wave of radicalization was introduced with the “reformed” curriculum, which was gradually prepared and published beginning in 2016.<sup>4</sup> Again, much hope was attached to this announced reform of the Palestinian curriculum, only to see a mortal blow directed at the promise of peace and coexistence. The texts con-



veyed radical messages portraying a vision that is both chauvinistic and Islamist. The new textbooks of 2017–18 intensified their tone, hinting towards the extermination of the Jews after Palestine is liberated. The books also stress the role of terrorism and its place in the violent struggle for national determination. The new books also emphasize that the return of the descendants of the 1948 refugees will take place not to Israel but to liberated Palestine.<sup>5</sup>

The PA's Ministry of Education inserted radical material into the highly competitive matriculation (*tawjihi*) exams, which require intensive memorization, to impress these messages in students' minds just before graduation.<sup>6</sup> Quantitative research discovered that calls for violence were more accentuated in learning materials for early teens, suggesting that the Palestinian Authority was encouraging child deaths in clashes with Israeli security forces.<sup>7</sup> Apart from the curriculum itself, which is radical but continually examined by donor states, Hamas and UNRWA bombard Palestinian students with brutal hate material.<sup>8</sup>

This educational disaster contributed to the October 7 atrocities and the wave of glee and jubilation within Palestinian society that accompanied them. Hundreds of civilians responded to Hamas calls from mosque loudspeakers, crossed the border, and participated in the horrors, often targeting people they knew and who had helped them in the past. The failure of the Palestinian leadership to raise a decent generation suggests that restructuring Palestinian education after the war should be led and supervised by scholars and educators who are *not part of the current Palestinian establishment* of Hamas, Fatah, the Palestinian Authority, and the PLO. In any event, most plans for the "day after" in Gaza exclude, or dramatically limit, any role of the Palestinian Authority and Hamas in administering the Gaza Strip for a long interim period. While these plans often contradict each other, the demand for a serious deradicalization program in education is a common denominator.<sup>9</sup>

It is worth mentioning, however, that other Palestinian or semi-Palestinian schooling systems exist in the Levant. The Jordanian curriculum is largely a Palestinian one, reflecting the large percentage of

Jordanians of Palestinian origins in the Kingdom.<sup>10</sup> Although the Jordanian curriculum promotes a hostile attitude towards Israel and peace, embracing elements of jihadi culture since the Amman Message of 2004, there has been significant progress in the country's educational content.<sup>11</sup> The Arab Israeli curriculum is content-wise "a national minority curriculum," embracing Palestinian heritage, especially in history, geography, and literature. It also includes much regional education, including Islamic Studies and Arab literature, both modern and classic, and can contribute material alongside other curricula in the Arab world. Its main advantage for our case seems to be the trilingual education (Arabic, Hebrew and English) and the sophisticated and nuanced intercultural tools it provides.<sup>12</sup> In East Jerusalem, Arab schools teach three curricula including, the Palestinian (PA) curriculum; a municipality-moderated version of the same Palestinian curriculum, which includes pro-peace messaging and a healthy dose of fine educational material; and the Arab Israeli curriculum.

In order for Palestinian curriculum to be peace-loving and successful, it must be fashioned to include the *shared regional core curriculum*, so Palestinians can feel comfortable that they are not singled out for reforms. The reform process could be implemented in two stages: first, by deradicalizing the current curriculum, ideally starting with the upcoming academic year. Elements from a host of other regional Arabic-language curricula could be borrowed as a stop-gap solution. The second stage should involve *aligning the Palestinian curriculum with a shared regional core education*. These standards will be gradually introduced across the region, starting with the Abraham Accords countries, as well as Egypt, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia. The Palestinians must form part of this regional development.

## Discussion: A New Islamic Golden Age

Most curricula share a regional outlook for a new future in the Middle East. The radicals wish to violently subjugate the entire region and are fascinated by the notion of a glorious *jihad* war.

The moderates seek a prosperous, decentralized regional alliance that would peacefully interact at home and with the rest of the world. While both camps foster a sort of regional identity, they also pay tribute to the existing state system. Even radical curricula ensures that students will be loyal to their national government. Country-centered patriotic feelings are part of the curricula in both failed and more successful states. However, these national curricula are often not truly inclusive, reflecting instability and weakness, identity politics, and potential deterioration in the future.

As we ponder the future of Middle Eastern education following the traumatic October 7 attack and the Gaza War, we must first recognize the failure of the current education systems, particularly the internationally funded Palestinian education. The wave of euphoric and sadistic glee that followed the atrocities cast doubt on the regional adherence to moral values and compassion. Especially disappointing was the enthusiastic support of Al-Azhar, the prestigious Egyptian Islamic University and religious authority, to the patently anti-Islamic crimes of Hamas, suggesting that Al-Azhar, along with its curriculum, remains a fundamentalist institution.<sup>13</sup> In his classic article on Islamic fundamentalism, Martin Kramer explains that this ideology subscribes to the idea that “Islam must have power in this world.” But this is not the entire story. Kramer quotes one of the forerunners of Islamic fundamentalism, Jamal al-Din al-Afghani, saying that “power is never manifested and concrete unless it weakens and subjugates others.” This sentiment led to “a resolute anti-Westernism, a vision of an authoritarian Islamic state, a propensity to violence, and a pan-Islamic urge.”<sup>14</sup> Future regional education should do a better job in uprooting this type of attitude and foster an alternative vision of peace and solidarity.

Education should prepare the ground for a unique civilizational breakthrough that can compete with, collaborate with, and contribute to the world at large. The best way forward is to embrace commonalities and ambitions that already exist in the curricula of both moderates and radicals. These include love of life, love of God, the importance of community and nation, compassion, family values, human rights, philosophical fluency, and refined

culture. The goal, however, must be to educate for a peaceful state system—in fact, an alliance—that is based on respect and efflorescence for all. Another dimension of reform is to elucidate the dire consequences of fundamentalism and rejectionism and inculcate solidarity and togetherness.<sup>15</sup> These ideas should form what I will call the “Abrahamic Curriculum,” an educational approach that builds upon traditional values, in the pursuit of tolerance and peace.

We should fashion a regional educational foundation that will enhance patriotism within each country based on its unique traits and contributions while addressing the yearning – widespread in the regional curricula – for belonging to a wider, supra-national story. Instead of regional dreams undermining national identities, this regional story will bolster and legitimize statehood. This educational foundation should ideally prepare the ground for the emergence of a regional community that would develop a *particular modernity*, competing with and contributing to other modern civilizations as humankind contends with the challenges of an extremely demanding century.<sup>16</sup>

The natural choice for such an educational foundation is the Abrahamic discourse, or *Pan-Abrahamicism*.<sup>17</sup> The Abrahamic discourse opens the gates for welcoming Israel into a family of Islamic-Arab nations. It allows Muslims and Jews to see themselves as blood-related “cousins,” who quarreled and distanced themselves from each other, but are able to get closer, reconcile and restore the initial, natural “family” order.<sup>18</sup> The Abraham Accords consider Jews and Arabs as “descendants of a common ancestor,” inviting “Muslims, Jews, Christians, and peoples of *all faiths, denominations, beliefs and nationalities*” to live in the region, committing themselves “to a spirit of coexistence, mutual understanding and mutual respect.”<sup>19</sup>

Covering religious, ethnic, and cultural dimensions, the Abrahamic discourse has gradually developed at least since the 1970s among Palestinians, Egyptians, Jordanians, and Emiratis. Authentic and widespread, the Abrahamic discourse should be considered first and foremost as part of the debate over what is Islam. Envisioning a region that respects “all faiths, denominations, beliefs and nationalities”

amounts to a proclamation that Islam, as a faith and civilization, is tolerant, modern and forward looking. And yes, powerful.

We should seek education that envisions the region at large as a welcoming and successful epicenter that is capable of bringing about a new Islamic Golden Age. For centuries, “the world of Islam was in the forefront of human achievement,” the foremost military and economic power in the world, the leader in the arts and sciences of civilization.<sup>20</sup> Islamist circles believe that this can be revived by endless *jihad* wars against Muslims and non-Muslims alike, accompanied by strict adherence to their opportunistic interpretations of Sharia rules. The Muslim Brotherhood, for example, claims that the Abrahamic discourse aims at the creation of a new religion to replace Islam and annul its inherent superiority over Christianity and Judaism. Whether we like it or not, the Abrahamic discourse or pan-Abrahamism is not and will never be a religion. It is largely an Arab-Islamic civilizational project that, if successful, may lead to nothing short of a new Islamic Golden Age. Islam, let us not forget, is not just a faith, but also a civilization. Like former Islamic Golden Ages, an Abrahamic arrangement will encourage and benefit from the cultural participation of non-Muslims and immensely contribute to humankind at large. Far from an Islam that, in Kramer’s words, “weakens and subjugates others,”<sup>21</sup> this Golden Age will empower others as it focuses on creating a fortunate and free civilization of believers.

## The Pan-Abrahamic Educational Approach

Education in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank should be thoroughly reformed immediately. Practically, this would take place in two stages. The first phase requires an immediate deradicalization of the current curriculum and matriculation exams (*tawjihī*). Ideally, but not necessarily, this will be conducted in coordination with the Palestinian Authority. The second stage should adjust the Palestinian curriculum to new Abrahamic standards that will be gradually introduced to curricula across the region, beginning with, but not limited to, the

Abraham Accords countries, as well as Egypt, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia.

Developing a regional core education – a set of common programs and principles – is urgent.<sup>22</sup> Abrahamic education should envision the inclusion of the many ethnicities, cultures, and sects that made Islam a cosmopolitan civilization.<sup>23</sup> Pan-Abrahamism is essentially an *Arab-Islamic civilizational project* that is not exclusive. Apart from Israel, this is particularly important as regards the Iranian, Turkic, and Kurdish worlds, but it will also allow openings toward the Mediterranean, the Hellenic and the Russian Orthodox worlds, the Caucasus, and so on.<sup>24</sup> It should draw on what is good in the past, present, and future, including the manifold pre-monotheistic civilizations and tribal traditions, the Islamic civilization, the global modern world with its scientific and spiritual contributions, and, most of all, the challenging future we face.

An overhaul in the study of religion, culture, philosophy, and history may be considered so students can combine adherence to religion with free and open academic exploration of the arts and sciences. We believe that the spirit of Abraham, Hagar, and Sara suggests that the participants share familial roots and a religious worldview that provides for original philosophical and scientific approaches that are unique to the region. Religious education and intercultural theology may form the basis of pan-Abrahamic education, with a default assumption that students are raised religiously, but are also free thinkers and free to choose their faiths, denominations, beliefs and nationalities.

If Europe is agnostic or secular by default while allowing freedom of faith, the pan-Abrahamic education may well be religious by default while cherishing freedom of belief.<sup>25</sup> Such a bold move would facilitate a fruitful cultural engagement with the European Union as a sibling civilization sharing the Greco-Roman legacy, Abrahamic monotheism, and the Mediterranean basin. It was Bernard Lewis’s assessment regarding the region between Christendom, later the West, and Islamic civilization that “a new era of peaceful coexistence is possible.”<sup>26</sup> Education can pave the way to democracy. Indeed, many regional curricula, radical and moderate, already claim to be democratic or frankly



share with students the truth that democracy at home is still a work in progress. The Arab Spring events and their aftermath demonstrated that our masses yearn for democracy but are yet incapable of securing it. The role of education, therefore, is to allow for a gradual development of a variety of local consultative systems based on regional traditions, tribal and religious, as well as dialogue with other civilizations.

From the Israeli and Jewish perspectives, embracing the Jewish people's self-determination in the Land of Israel is a *sine qua non*. Other fundamentals must convey gender equality, the holiness of life, and freedom. Iranian masses trying to set themselves free from the Khomeinist yoke communicated this principle through the slogan "Woman, Life, Freedom!" (*zan, zendegī, azadī*). And in Turkish textbooks, one finds that Civil Code takes precedence when it comes to women's rights.<sup>27</sup>

Arabic *must* be seriously taught in all the curricula either as a first, minority, regional, international, literary or religious language. The Arabic language then should be part of the common core education, which will also cover national languages and literature, civics, history, religion, philosophy, math, mind-body consciousness, and liberal arts and sciences, with much emphasis on mutual respect, peace and tolerance.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, this article invites us to keep seven elements in mind as we approach the great challenge of creating a regional core education. The most urgent is the need to impose decent peace education on the Gaza Strip once this is possible. In parallel, and since Gaza is an inseparable part of the region, a shared Abrahamic core education for all those countries who wish it should be developed. A third point to keep in mind is that educational reform and other pan-Abrahamic initiatives, such as constitutional enactments, are civilizationally Arab-Islamic, leading to an Islamic golden age, while also welcoming non-Arab and non-Muslim countries and groups in the region and beyond. A fourth element, therefore, is that the envisioned core education will largely be based on existing commonalities in the region's curricula while keeping away from hate and radicalism, to be replaced by mutual respect, cooperation, and adherence to national sovereignty. The fifth element recognizes the difficulty faced by many countries to pronounce an effective national identity and hence encourages a degree of regional participation in formulating curricula. A sixth point to consider is to make religious studies a default within the core education, while stressing via philosophical and other means total freedom of belief and gender equality as a critical dimension of divine and human dignity. The seventh and final point is that the proposed core education should present unique solutions to some of the region and the world's main challenges, drawing on the region's heritage and its unique makeup and culture.

1 Fouad Ajami, *The Arab Predicament: Arab Political Thought and Practice Since 1967*, Cambridge University Press, 1981, pg. 19 .

2 *Modern and Contemporary History of Palestine, Grade 11, Part 2*, 2006, pp. 57, 58.

3 Arnon Groiss, *Palestinian Textbooks: From Arafat to Abbas and Hamas*, Center for Monitoring the Impact of Peace and the American Jewish Committee, 2008, p. 1, <https://www.impact-se.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/PA2008.pdf>.

4 Eldad J. Pardo, "Palestinian Elementary School Curriculum 2016-2017: Radicalization and Revival of The PLO Program," IMPACT-se, April 2017. To download this and follow-up reports on the new curriculum, go to: <https://www.impact-se.org/reports-2/palestinian-territories/pa/>; Arnon Groiss, "Revealing Maps: The Palestinian Vision as Taught in PA Schools," The Meir Amit Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center and Nahum Bedein Center, August 15, 2023, [https://www.terrorism-info.org.il/app/uploads/2023/08/E\\_157\\_23.pdf](https://www.terrorism-info.org.il/app/uploads/2023/08/E_157_23.pdf).

- 5 Arnon Groiss, "Summary of the Attitude to the Jewish-Israeli 'Other' and to Peace In the Palestinian Authority Schoolbooks Including Those Ones in UNRWA," *Israel Behind the News*, June 12, 2019, <https://israelbehindthenews.com/2019/06/12/dr-arnon-groiss-summary-of-the-attitude-to-the-jewish-israeli-other-and-to-peace-in-the-palestinian-authority-schoolbooks-including-those-ones-in-unrwa-use-june-2019/>.
- 6 Eldad J. Pardo, "Palestinian Curriculum Put to the Test: The General Certificate of High School Examination in Palestine (*Tawjihi*)," IMPACT-se, November 2019, [https://www.impact-se.org/wp-content/uploads/IMPACT-se-Report\\_Tawjihi-Matriculation-Exam-on-the-Palestinian-Curriculum.pdf](https://www.impact-se.org/wp-content/uploads/IMPACT-se-Report_Tawjihi-Matriculation-Exam-on-the-Palestinian-Curriculum.pdf); "Review of 2023 Palestinian Matriculation Exams," IMPACT-se, July 2023, <https://www.impact-se.org/wp-content/uploads/Review-of-2023-Palestinian-Matriculation-Exams.pdf>.
- 7 "The New Palestinian Curriculum: By the Numbers – Quantitative Analysis of the Current Palestinian Ministry of Education Curriculum," IMPACT-se, September 2019, p. 11, <https://www.impact-se.org/wp-content/uploads/By-the-Numbers-Quantitative-Analysis-on-PA-Curriculum.pdf>.
- 8 The report in a series is "UNRWA Education: Textbooks and Terror," IMPACT-se, November 2023. For this and other UNRWA material, <https://www.impact-se.org/unrwa/>. UNRWA in Gaza is largely a tool of HAMAS, but there are also children materials published through HAMAS organs. See, "Al-Fateh – The Hamas Web Magazine for Children: Indoctrination to Jihad, Annihilation and Self-Destruction," IMPACT-se, 2009, [https://www.impact-se.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/Al-Fateh\\_Report\\_2009\\_final.pdf](https://www.impact-se.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/Al-Fateh_Report_2009_final.pdf).
- 9 One The simplest idea for an interim administration in Gaza is the local Administration under Israeli security control. Gabi Siboni, "The Road to Destruction of Hamas Runs Through IDF Military and Civil Control – Northern Gaza First," JISS, May 30, 2024, <https://jiss.org.il/en/siboni-the-road-to-destruction-of-hamas/>. But there are other ideas as well. Prime Minister Netanyahu issued a three-stage plan in coordination with a coalition of Arab countries. The Arab Coalition will create in the second stage a multilateral body called the Gaza Rehabilitation Authority (GRA) to oversee the reconstruction efforts and manage the Strip's finances. The third stage will see transfer of power to "a local Gaza government or a unified Palestinian government (including the West Bank). However, this is contingent on the successful *deradicalization and demilitarization* of the Gaza Strip and will be subject to agreement by all parties." Yuval Barnea, "From Crisis to Prosperity: Netanyahu's Vision for Gaza 2035 Revealed Online," *The Jerusalem Post*, May 3, 2024, <https://www.jpost.com/israel-hamas-war/article-799756>. Danile Jonas Roche, "Gaza 2035: Israel Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu Unveils Regional Plan to Build a 'Massive Free Trade Zone' with Rail Service to NEOM," *The Architect's Newspaper*, May 21, 2024, <https://www.archpaper.com/2024/05/benjamin-netanyahu-unveils-regional-plan-free-trade-zone-rail-service-neom/>. Reham Owda, *Sada*, "The Day After in Gaza: Four Post-War Scenarios," February 6, 2024, <https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/2024/02/the-day-after-in-gaza-four-post-war-scenarios?lang=en>. One report recommends building a U.S.-backed "Coalition of the Willing" that will establish no-PA, no-Hamas "International Trust for Gaza," while security remains an Israeli mission. "The Day After: A Plan for Gaza," JINSA and the Vandenberg Coalition, February 2024, [https://jinsa.org/jinsa\\_report/the-day-after-a-plan-for-gaza/](https://jinsa.org/jinsa_report/the-day-after-a-plan-for-gaza/). For a similar plan with security assumed by an international Policing Force answering to and International Contact Group supervising Gaza's new Multi-National Authority (MNA), see: Keith Dayton, James F. Jeffrey, Eran Lerman et al., "Plan for Postwar Gaza," The Wilson Center, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/plan-postwar-gaza>. Also floated were the idea of a UN Trusteeship or a UN Transitional Authority for Gaza. Marshall J. Breger, Richard Caplan, and Larry D. Johnson, "The Day After: A UN Transitional Authority for Gaza," The Stimson Center, June 25, 2024, <https://www.stimson.org/2024/the-day-after-a-un-transitional-authority-for-gaza/>.  
The INSS plan suggests "maintaining Israel's security responsibility in the Palestinian arena," while "returning the (renewed) Palestinian Authority to control the Gaza Strip, with the assistance of an international coalition, including Arab and Western countries." See: "The Day After: The Development of the War Requires Brave Decisions," INSS, April 2024, <https://www.inss.org.il/publication/the-day-after-2024/>. For another version of this view: Efraim Inbar, "Let the Palestinian Authority into Gaza," JISS, May 26, 2024, <https://jiss.org.il/en/inbar-let-the-palestinian-authority-into-gaza/>. Leaving a role for Hamas is typically less direct but is assumed by many analysts to be a US policy. The Lebanese *Al-Akhabar* reported that the program of the Arab foreign ministers and the American administration includes "demobilization and reintegration of Hamas in the PLO," as part of their "Day After" vision for Gaza. Roi Kais, "Recognition of a Palestinian State and the Integration of the Body Politic of Hamas: The Plan of the Arab and American Foreign Ministers for 'the Day After,'" (Hebrew) *Israeli Public Broadcasting Corporation (IPBC)*, May 18, 2024, <https://www.kan.org.il/content/kan-news/defense/750625/>. Hamas sources told PBS that they will not be disarmed suggesting a model not unlike that of the Lebanese Hizballah and Iraqi Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) aka a powerful armed political party controlling a body politic ostensibly represented by a weak official administration. Aya Batrawi, "A Hamas Leader Says they will Give Up Governing Gaza, but Won't Lay Down Arms," *NPR*, August 16, 2024, <https://www.npr.org/2024/08/16/nx-s1-5077757/gaza-war-hamas-leader-basem-naim-doha-interview>.
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- 11 The Amman Message, <http://ammanmessage.com/>. Eldad J. Pardo, "Opportunity for Progress: The Jordanian Curriculum 2014–22," IMPACT-se, 2023, pp. 10–11, forthcoming; [Pre-Print, <https://www.dropbox.com/scl/fi/b9ixd842o2h0rkuke9msb/Pardo-2023-Jordan-JordanFinal-Draft.pdf?rlkey=f5txfcq5cjhhasa3pfrh-2g4hr&e=1&dl=0>].

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- 14 Martin Kramer, "Fundamentalist Islam at Large: The Drive for Power," *Middle East Quarterly* (June 1996), pp. 37-49, <https://martinkramer.org/reader/archives/fundamentalist-islam-the-drive-for-power/>.
- 15 Joseph Braude, *Reclamation: A Cultural Policy for Arab-Israeli Partnership*, Washington DC: The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2019, p. 142. The book can serve as a good background for planners of future curricula.
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- 18 Ofir Winter, "Controversial Fraternity: Abrahamic Discourse as a Justification for Arab-Israeli Normalization," *The Journal for Interdisciplinary Middle Eastern Studies*, 9, 1 (2023): 26.
- 19 Abraham Accords Peace Agreement: Treaty of Peace, Diplomatic Relations and Full Normalization Between the United Arab Emirates and The State of Israel, September 15, 2020, p. 1. (Emphasis added), [https://2017-2021.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/UAE\\_Israel-treaty-signed-FINAL-15-Sept-2020-508.pdf](https://2017-2021.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/UAE_Israel-treaty-signed-FINAL-15-Sept-2020-508.pdf).
- 20 Lewis, *What Went Wrong?* .
- 21 Kramer, "Fundamentalist Islam."
- 22 Inspiration could be drawn from the Israeli Liba program, which should also be adjusted to fit the Abrahamic standards for all the nation's four curricula (National, Religious National, Ultra-Orthodox, and Arab-Palestinian as national minority).
- 23 Iranians (Sunni and Shiite), Turks (Sunni and Alevi), Azerbaijani, Kurds, Druze, Aramaeans, Armenians, Alawis, Amazighs and Yazidis to name a few fall into the category of "all faiths, denominations, beliefs and nationalities."
- 24 On geopolitical and civilizational commonalities of the Orthodox world (Slavic and Hellenic) with Central Asia and the Middle East, see: Dimitri Kitsikis «Une vision géopolitique: la Région intermédiaire» (A Geopolitical Vision: the Intermediate Region), *Relations internationales*, Paris, no.109, 2002; Alexander Sergeevich Titov, "Lev Gumilev: Ethnogenesis and Eurasianism," Doctoral Dissertation, University College London, May 2005.
- 25 "No compulsion in religion (*lā ikrāh fī al-dīn*)," Quran 2:256.
- 26 Martin Kramer, "The Conflicted Legacy of Bernard Lewis: A Clash of Interpretations," *Foreign Policy*, June 2, 2018, p. 5. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/middle-east/2018-06-07/conflicted-legacy-bernard-lewis?cid=int-fls&pgtype=hpg>.
- 27 Ahmet Utku Özensoy, *Sosyal Bilgiler – 5. Sınıf Ders Kitabı* (Social Studies, Fifth-Grade Textbook), Harf, 2014, pp. 44-47.

# Education for Peace in the Aftermath of the Gaza War: Challenges and Opportunities

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## Abstract:

The Palestinian-Israeli conflict remains a central issue in a tumultuous region. The Abraham Accords offer hope for deradicalization and warm peace, in contrast to the cold peace of previous agreements. However, conflicts like the Gaza War complicate this vision, underscoring the need for educational efforts to foster coexistence. For true peace, textbooks must condemn violence, hatred, and antisemitism rather than support it. The paper compares the education systems and textbooks of countries with cold peace agreements, like Egypt and Jordan, to those of Abraham Accords countries, such as the UAE and Morocco, which aim for warmer peace. It also contrasts the educational approaches of the countries of resistance, including Iran and Qatar, with the countries of moderation, including Saudi Arabia, noting that Palestinians are currently more aligned with the countries of resistance. For those involved in planning and rebuilding Gaza in the "day after," these discussions of educational reform are crucial. Leaders and politicians must learn from the educational frameworks of tolerance and moderation in the region to find opportunities to reform Gaza's educational system, transforming it into a tool for peace-building and conflict resolution, which will hopefully project on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict at large.

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## Cold Peace, the Abraham Accords, and Resistance vs. Moderation

The early peace treaties between Israel and its Arab neighbors have generally been described as relationships of "cold peace." The Abraham Accords, signed in 2020, have brought about an era of "warm peace" between Israel and several of its neighbors in the region. A key factor for determining the distinction between "cold" and "warm" peace agreements is the approach towards Israel taken in the education systems and textbooks of each respective country.

## The "Cold Peace" Paradigm

Egypt and Jordan, which signed peace treaties with Israel in the 1970s and 1990s, have maintained a "cold peace" in their relations. This is reflected in both respective education systems, where textbooks often portray Israel and Jews in a negative light.<sup>1</sup> Many Egyptian textbooks, for example, preach "peace" as an Egyptian national ethos. However, this ethos is not extended to Israel, which is still viewed as an enemy. Many textbooks and resources in Egypt omit Israel's name from maps, and often depict it as an aggressive occupying entity. For example, 12th-grade geography textbooks describe the demand for a Jewish state in the Land of Israel as "racist," implying discrimina-

tory practices towards the Arab minority to force emigration.<sup>2</sup>

The education system at the Al-Azhar institution, which serves about 1.8 million students or 7.5 percent of Egypt’s student population, adopts a more hostile tone towards Israel, akin to the radical Islamist ideologies they oppose, such as the Muslim Brotherhood and Salafi-jihadists. They refer to Israel as “the Zionist entity,” describe Jerusalem as an Arab and Islamic city with no historical connection to Judaism, call on Muslims to struggle for its liberation, and reject normalization with Israel. Additionally, these textbooks do not mention the Israeli-Egyptian peace agreement, despite its religious sanction during Sadat’s presidency by the sages of Al-Azhar.<sup>3</sup>

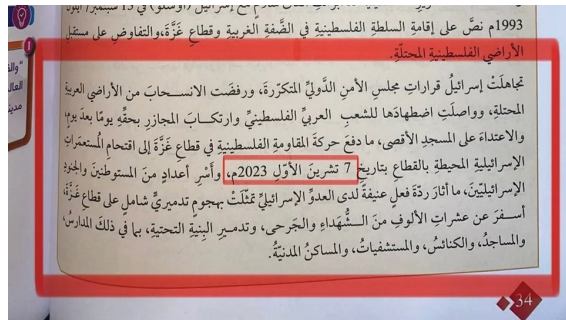
وأكدت المنظمة العالمية للتراث والثقافة والعلوم (اليونيسكو) في ٢٠١٦م  
أحقية المسلمين بمدينة القدس والمسجد الأقصى، ونفت المنظمة أي علاقة  
للإهود بمدينة القدس، وما فيها من مقدسات .

Reading and Writing, Grade 11, 2021-22, p 81.

However, according to The Institute for Monitoring Peace and Cultural Tolerance in School Education (IMPACT-se), since 2018, there has been significant improvement in the portrayal of Israel and Jews in Egyptian textbooks for grades 1 to 5, which were rewritten as part of a reform by the Egyptian Ministry of Education. The new textbooks acknowledge the importance of peace with Israel and promote tolerance and coexistence among members of the major monotheistic religions. They often depict Jews and Judaism with tolerance and respect, removing negative and antisemitic content previously widespread in earlier curricula. They highlight commonalities between Islam and Judaism, such as the Muslim recognition of the Torah and Moses, and the permission given in Qur’anic verses to eat kosher food and marry Jewish women.<sup>4</sup>

The Jordanian curriculum, on the other hand, is profoundly anti-Israeli and has not seen much improvement. The sentiment expressed in textbooks is likely influenced by the significant percentage of the Palestinian population in the country.<sup>5</sup> This is evident in the fact that, following the October 7 massacres, a 10th-grade Civics textbook introduced a section about the events, justifying

the Hamas attacks against “the Israeli enemy,” describing Israeli civilian hostages as “settlers,” blaming Israel’s treatment of the Palestinians for provoking the attacks, and accusing Israel of committing an “attack of mass destruction” against the Palestinians.<sup>6</sup>



Although the peace agreement between Jordan and Israel is largely ignored, Jordanian textbooks do show some pragmatism toward Israel by acknowledging Jordan’s partial responsibility for the Arab rejection of the 1947 partition plan and the subsequent 1948 Arab invasion.<sup>7</sup>

## Education for Peace

In contrast, the countries that are part of the more recent Abraham Accords, such as the UAE, Bahrain, and Morocco, have taken a different approach in their education systems and have actively worked to promote tolerance, coexistence, and positive perceptions of Israel and Jews.<sup>8</sup>

The UAE has been a leader in promoting pluralism and interfaith harmony, actively integrating these values into its educational curriculum and media. This commitment was exemplified by hosting Pope Francis and organizing The Human Fraternity Conference in 2019. This landmark event united religious leaders from the Muslim, Christian, and Jewish communities. In 2023, the UAE established the Abrahamic Family House in Abu Dhabi. This interfaith complex includes the “Mosque of Imam Al-Tayeb,” the “Church of Saint Francis,” and the “Moses ben Maimon Synagogue,” symbolizing the UAE’s dedication to fostering religious tolerance, peaceful coexistence, and interfaith dialogue.<sup>9</sup>



The impact of these initiatives on the UAE's educational system has been profound. The Abrahamic Family House has evolved into a significant educational resource, with many schools organizing field trips for students to visit. Universities also encourage students to undertake projects focused on peace, tolerance, and coexistence by actively engaging with this landmark institution.

Moreover, in its Islamic studies textbook, the UAE praises its peace initiative with Israel, emphasizing that cooperation and peace align not only with Islamic teachings, but also with the country's core identity. This educational approach aims to instill in students the importance of dialogue and mutual understanding in resolving conflicts and cultivating stable international relations.<sup>10</sup>

Additionally, the UAE's social studies textbook breaks away from historical narratives that have

Similarly, in the wake of the Abraham Accords, Morocco has undertaken measures to revise its educational curriculum, aiming to present a more positive and inclusive perspective on Israel and Jewish culture within the region. Morocco boasts centuries-old ties with its Jewish community, with a significant population of Sephardic Jews historically residing in the country. This long standing relationship has laid the groundwork for Morocco to adopt a more balanced and receptive approach towards Israel in its educational framework.<sup>13</sup>

In recent years, Moroccan textbooks have undergone revisions that incorporate more nuanced discussions on Jewish history, culture, and their contributions to Moroccan society. This includes recognizing the enduring presence of Jewish communities in Morocco and highlighting their beneficial impact on the nation's cultural and economic advancement.<sup>14</sup>



previously marginalized or omitted Jewish history and culture by acknowledging Judaism as an integral part of the Arab region. This shift is significant, as it recognizes the longstanding presence and contributions of Jewish communities in the Arab world, thereby promoting a more inclusive appreciation of the region's cultural diversity.<sup>11</sup>

The UAE has also incorporated the Abraham Accords into its textbooks, emphasizing the positive impacts of normalizing relations with Israel. In early 2023, the UAE announced plans to include the Holocaust in history classes, but this has not yet been implemented.<sup>12</sup>



Above image: A 4th grade Arabic textbook teaches about the importance of Jewish-Moroccan music to Moroccan musical tradition.<sup>15</sup>

The case of Bahrain differs from that of the UAE and Morocco. While Bahrain initially introduced changes to its school curriculum to reflect its normalization of ties with Israel, including lessons on the Holocaust and Israel, these changes have now been suspended due to domestic opposition. Various preachers and scholars issued statements urging the Ministry of Education to reconsider the changes, which likely prompted a high-level order from the crown prince. The education system

remains a sensitive issue in Bahrain's relationship with Israel.<sup>16</sup>

In Saudi Arabia, significant curricular changes were implemented after Mohammed bin Salman assumed power and became the Crown Prince in 2017. While the curriculum continues to reflect the country's support for the Palestinian cause, it no longer teaches students that Zionism is a "racist" European movement aimed at expelling Palestinians, or that its "fundamental goal" is to expand borders and take over Arab lands, oil wells, and Islamic and Christian holy sites in Jerusalem.<sup>17</sup>

However, Israel remains unrecognized on maps. In some cases, the name 'Palestine,' which previously covered the entire territory of Israel, has been systematically removed. The Holocaust is still absent from the curriculum, and Israel is referred to as "the Israeli occupation" or "Israeli occupiers" in the context of the 1948 War. Despite several problematic examples, Saudi Arabia's curricular changes demonstrate its commitment to progress and its efforts to align textbooks with the goals of deradicalization and peace-building.<sup>18</sup>

## Education as a Tool of War

While the education systems in countries that have rejected the path of normalization, led by Iran and supported by Qatar, are characterized by antisemitic and anti-Israel content, there are differences between them. Iran's education system exhibits more intense and ideologically driven hostility towards Israel and Jews, depicting Israel as an illegitimate state and an enemy of Islam. In contrast, Qatar's system, although critical, tends to frame the conflict in political terms, and is somewhat less extreme in its rhetoric.

In Iranian textbooks, animosity toward Israel is highlighted by portraying it as a threat not only to Iran but also to other Muslim nations, especially the Palestinians. For instance, the 8th grade Social Studies textbook emphasizes that the Palestinian issue and the fight against Zionism are relevant to all Muslims and are specifically related to the future and development of Iran.<sup>19</sup> An Iranian 12th grade Sociology textbook encourages Muslims to "apply

the jurisprudential situation of the world of Islam to properly address and resolve the Palestinian issue," teaching that Islamic jurisprudence requires Muslims to "resist attacks on the borders of the Muslim world," thereby also implicating Western powers wherever Muslims reside.<sup>20</sup>

Qatar exemplifies a country with an ambivalent stance toward the portrayal of Jews and Israel.<sup>21</sup> While it strives to align with international norms of peace and tolerance, it simultaneously accommodates Hamas's views and harbors key figures from the group. Consequently, Qatar removed much of the explicit antisemitic and anti-Jewish content from its textbooks in 2021, but continues to legitimize and glorify violence against Israel in both historical and contemporary contexts. For example, a 2017 Qatari textbook included apologetic messages explaining Nazi hatred toward Jews, such as Nazi Germany's "canceling the rights of the Jews because they had a great impact on the defeat of Germany in the First World War."<sup>22</sup> This content has since been removed, and the Holocaust is no longer mentioned at all.

Qatari textbooks promote a narrative that denies Jewish historical ties to the region of Israel/Palestine and portray Jewish self-determination as unjustifiable, racist, and cynical. These textbooks lack content that could foster empathy or understanding of the Jewish experience, such as the history of Jews in the Arab and Islamic world or the Holocaust.<sup>23</sup> Additionally, violent jihad and the glorification of martyrdom remain part of the curriculum. The education system consistently promotes a pro-Arab, anti-Israel nationalist narrative, depicting Israel and Israelis as a malevolent force devoid of human motivations and undeserving of empathy. This narrative is contrasted with the unquestionably just Palestinian-Arab cause. To support this perspective, Qatari students are taught historically dubious or unfounded ideas, such as the myth that the ancient Canaanite people, who inhabited present-day Israel, were Arabs.<sup>24</sup>

This stark contrast in educational approaches reflects the broader geopolitical divide in the region. The countries of resistance, led by Iran and Qatar, maintain a confrontational stance towards Israel and the West, using a revolutionary

approach that has brought chaos and instability to the region. In contrast, the countries of moderation, spearheaded by Saudi Arabia and the UAE, have embraced regional integration and normalization of relations, using an evolutionary approach that promotes development and prosperity.

The current war in Gaza has exacerbated hostility towards Israel. The increasing number of civilian casualties and the dire situation for civilians in Gaza has provided the countries of resistance with more opportunities to spread hatred and radicalization, especially through the media and the education system. Meanwhile, the efforts made by the countries of moderation to promote peacebuilding through education have been hindered by the war, making their message less convincing in the face of ongoing violence and civilian suffering. As a result, the voice of radicalization from the countries of resistance has overshadowed the efforts of the countries of moderation towards deradicalization.

## Reconstructing Gaza's Education System: A Blueprint for Peace

The main challenge in Gaza and the Palestinian territories is their alignment with the countries of resistance, a link that can be demonstrated by the education system. The war in Gaza did not create hostility and radicalization from scratch, but rather has exacerbated an existing situation. It has been found that the Palestinian Authority (PA) educational textbooks used by UNRWA are notorious for inciting violence, hatred, and antisemitism. According to IMPACT-se, an Israeli watchdog analyzing Palestinian textbooks, children are asked to solve math problems using martyrs from the first and second Intifadas, students are encouraged to "defend the motherland with blood," and instructors claim that Israel deliberately dumps radioactive and toxic waste in the West Bank. This indicates that incitement to violence is deeply embedded not only in the curriculum but also propagated by the instructors.<sup>25</sup>

UNRWA has been supporting Palestinian refugees in Gaza since 1948. Following a policy accepted by all UN agencies, it is legally required to work with the government in place. In Gaza, UNRWA has

found itself working alongside and with the Hamas led government since 2006. Recent findings have revealed that hundreds of terrorists, including members of Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ), are employed by UNRWA in the Gaza Strip, with some holding high-ranking positions within UNRWA or Hamas.<sup>26</sup> This has led to summer camps by Hamas for UNRWA students conducting simulations that depict the violence deemed necessary for "returning to Palestine." These so-called "fun games" focus on preparing for a perceived war to "liberate Palestine." Alarming, children at these summer camps engage in activities such as kidnapping soldiers, burning IDF vehicles, and handling weapons. Consequently, thousands of incited Arab youths invaded the Negev on October 7.<sup>27</sup>

The schoolbooks issued by the PA are compulsory across Judea, Samaria, Gaza Strip, and East Jerusalem in government, private, and UNRWA schools, using the latest editions, predominantly from 2020. These books, alongside teachers' guides from 2018, illustrate the PA's indoctrination process, also implemented in UNRWA schools. They emphasize three main themes regarding the conflict: First, the delegitimization of Israel's existence and the denial of Jewish historical presence and holy sites in the region. Second, the demonization of Israel and Jews, portraying them negatively both in the context of the conflict and religiously, influencing Palestinian children's perceptions deeply rooted in traditional societal norms. Third, the absence of any advocacy for peace with Israel, promoting instead a violent struggle for the liberation of all historical Palestinian territories, including pre-1967 Israeli territory, with terrorism seen as a legitimate component, implying encouragement of violence against Jews.<sup>28</sup>

The war in Gaza has caused extensive damage to the educational infrastructure, with over 78% of school buildings affected and many schools being used as shelters for internally displaced persons. This has significantly disrupted the education system, impacting thousands of students and teachers. The trauma and psychological distress caused by the war have further complicated the situation, making it difficult for children to return to a normal learning environment, increasing hostility and division. As a result, rather than serving as a vehicle



for peacebuilding and development, the education system has become a tool for sustaining more conflict and radicalization.<sup>29</sup>

Accordingly, selected international organizations such as American Near East Refugee Aid (ANERA) and UNICEF should be involved in providing humanitarian aid and support to the education sector in Gaza. Their efforts should include establishing temporary learning spaces, training teachers, and offering psychosocial services for children. Rebuilding schools should encompass not only the reconstruction of damaged buildings and ensuring they are well-equipped, but also a thorough review of textbooks to ensure they are free from violence, hatred, and antisemitic content. Additionally, textbooks that promote peace and coexistence require capable staff and instructors who are free from radical ideologies. This can be achieved by importing high-quality instructors from abroad and utilizing online teaching, provided that internet access is restored to a reasonable quality.<sup>30</sup>

Mohammed Dajani Daoudi, a distinguished Palestinian professor, peace activist and the founder of the Wastiya Institute stands out as a pioneering figure in the realm of education for peace. His lifelong commitment revolves around fostering dialogue and mutual understanding between Palestinians and Israelis. In 2007, Dajani established the Wasatia movement, derived from the Arabic term for “moderation.” This movement advocates for a balanced interpretation of Islam that promotes coexistence, non-violence, and constructive dialogue. Through Wasatia, Dajani endeavors to combat the spread of extremism and radicalization within Palestinian society, particularly among young people.<sup>31</sup>

His pioneering efforts in education and peacebuilding hold profound significance, especially within the tumultuous context of Gaza, a region scarred by prolonged conflict and hardship. Mohammed Dajani Daoudi’s contributions to peace education are noteworthy, including his contentious 2014 journey to Auschwitz with Palestinian students. Despite encountering severe criticism and threats to his life, Dajani remained steadfast in his conviction that acknowledging Jewish suffering during the Holocaust is crucial for nurturing empathy and promoting reconciliation. Additionally, he has

developed educational materials aimed at encouraging students to critically engage with diverse perspectives on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, transcending the oversimplified narratives that often dominate discussions.<sup>32</sup>

Dajani Daoudi’s work has not been without its challenges. The ongoing blockade of Gaza and the region’s volatile political climate have posed significant obstacles, forcing him and his team to adapt and find creative solutions. In Gaza, the challenges are even more pronounced, with its education system heavily influenced by the countries of resistance, a coalition of political and militant groups that promote a narrative of perpetual conflict and resistance. Changing this narrative requires not only reforming the curriculum but also addressing the broader socio-political dynamics that fuel hostility and radicalization.<sup>33</sup>

In this context, given the heavy influence of the countries of resistance on Gaza, a team comprising Israeli and Arab professors, including Professor Kamal Abdel-Malek, renowned for his expertise in Arabic literature and teaching at Princeton and Brown universities, Dr. Mira Feuerstein, who teaches Media & Communication Studies at Oranim Educational Academic College, and myself, collaborated to develop curriculum materials aimed at promoting peace indirectly in the region. Our approach avoids direct confrontation with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict to mitigate potential resistance and backlash.

Professor Abdel-Malek focused on using literature as a tool for fostering non-violent, mutually beneficial relationships among Arabs and Jews in the Middle East and globally. Dr. Feuerstein emphasized Environmental Education, highlighting how joint efforts in scientific development by Arabs and Jews can enhance environmental protection, and how media can promote scientific and rational discourse. My contribution centered on Media Literacy materials designed to empower students to critically analyze media messages and understand their impact, thereby encouraging them to challenge prevailing norms and perceptions. However, the implementation of such initiatives requires support and funding from international organiza-

tions or specific government agencies, which none of the professors have been able to secure.

Overhauling Gaza's education system presents a formidable challenge. Attempts to introduce educational models from the countries of moderation would likely encounter significant resistance. Gaza's current educational framework is heavily influenced by the countries of resistance, complicating any reform initiatives. Addressing this necessitates a strengthened network of educators and peacebuilding experts, supported by well-structured and capable international organizations dedicated to promoting peace through education.

Ironically, Western countries tasked with reforming Gaza's education system face challenges of radicalization and hostility within Muslim schools on their own soil. These institutions are often influenced and run by radical groups like the Muslim Brotherhood, which exploit democratic systems to spread extremist ideologies, including violence, hatred, and antisemitic content, through their curriculum and teaching staff. This situation starkly contradicts the core values of tolerance, pluralism, and democratic principles that Western societies aim to uphold, highlighting the need for textbook scrutiny and review.<sup>34</sup>

## Conclusion

The educational system in Gaza both reflects and fuels the region's complex socio-political dynamics, aligning with the countries of resistance. Shaped by decades of conflict and influenced by these countries, Gaza's schools have perpetuated hostility and radicalization, hindering prospects for peace and reconciliation. Recent wars and the ongoing blockade have intensified these challenges, turning educational institutions into arenas of ideological struggle and deepening the trauma experienced by successive generations of Palestinian youth. Consequently, attempts to import educational models from countries of moderation would face strong resistance and are unlikely to succeed.

The education system reflects the political landscape of each country, as demonstrated by the diverse educational models observed in the Abra-

ham Accords countries, despite sharing a common objective of peace. These models vary due to differing historical backgrounds and societal characteristics. Moreover, the prevailing sentiment among the general public in the region leans more towards the countries of resistance, posing significant challenges to the efforts of countries promoting moderation and peace, including their impact on the education system in Gaza.

To effectively rebuild Gaza's education system and the Palestinian territories, it is not feasible to simply adopt the educational models of countries like the UAE and Morocco, as seen in the Abraham Accords. This process requires a political system similar to that of moderate countries or at least one that shares their vision and approach. The current situation in Gaza, coupled with the detrimental effects of a corrupt and extremist education system, requires a series of preliminary steps.

These steps include canceling the UNRWA war curriculum that promotes Jihad and martyrdom and ceasing paramilitary training in all UNRWA schools. It is imperative to rigorously scrutinize and revise their textbooks to remove any content that incites violence, promotes hatred, or perpetuates antisemitism. Additionally, UNRWA must dismiss employees affiliated with Hamas or any radical organization and implement strict monitoring of instructors. Auditing donor funds from 68 nations is also necessary to prevent the undesired flow of cash to Gaza-based terror groups that have controlled UNRWA operations for the past 18 years.

Expert educators in peace studies involved in reforming Gaza's education system must have substantial on-the-ground experience to design comprehensive curricula that combat the socio-political dynamics perpetuating hostility and radicalization. A strengthened network of educators and peacebuilding experts including those from Abraham Accords countries, should be established and supported by well-structured and capable international organizations dedicated to promoting peace through education.

By prioritizing an educational framework that promotes peace, tolerance, and mutual understanding, Gaza's youth can be empowered to envision a

future defined by hope rather than animosity. This inclusive approach fosters a collective longing for peace that spans borders and generations, paving

the way for a more cohesive and prosperous future in the region.

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# Media at a Time of Conflict – The Gaza War in Focus

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*Mohammad Al- Sayed*

## Introduction

In the early morning hours on August 2nd, 1990, the news of the invasion of Kuwait by Saddam Hussein's troops was officially announced on television. The First Gulf War, as the ensuing conflict would come to be known, was the first war to receive extensive live daily coverage, starting the "news satellite" revolution. News channels and media outlets like CNN and BBC provided televised coverage of the war to a global audience. Despite widespread television coverage, news still traveled at a slower pace than today. During the first few hours of the invasion, most Kuwaiti citizens and people around the world were unaware of what was unfolding, a reality unimaginable in today's day and age.

The advent of social media in the following decades made way for more "media revolutions." The Syrian War (2011-2021) was dubbed as the first "Social Media War."<sup>1</sup> Platforms like Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, Instagram, and WhatsApp were used by all parties in the conflict to spread misinformation, hate speech, images of attacks, and other inflammatory content. In several cases, cameras were mounted to Kalashnikovs, giving viewers a video game-like perspective.<sup>2</sup> Nearly every moment of both the current war in Ukraine and Israel's war with Hamas in Gaza has been documented via social media platforms, opening a new battlefield, fought by those sitting in front of their screens.

The widespread adoption of social media, especially in the MENA region, has made it significantly easier, cheaper, and faster to spread news and narratives to the public. Roughly 36% of Arabs noted that social media has been their most important source for following the Israel-Gaza War, compared to only 1% who use daily newspapers and publications.<sup>3</sup> Thus, the narratives, perspectives,

and storylines pushed on X, Facebook, TikTok, and Instagram hold immense weight in shaping public opinion in the Middle East.

Since October 7th, the social media environment in the Arab world has been dominated by sentiments of division and resistance, challenging the strides made by the Abraham Accords in promoting hope and tolerance. In many ways, the social media environment and its effect on public opinion over the past 10 months is reminiscent of the unfortunate role those social media outlets played in the 2011 Arab Spring. Platforms like Twitter and Facebook, along with other traditional media outlets like Al Jazeera, played a significant part in shaping public opinion, mobilizing revolutionaries, and perpetuating crises.

This article will explore the messages, ideas, and trends that have flooded Arab social media since the outbreak of the current round of fighting in Gaza. It will analyze the posts, hashtags, and talking-points that have shaped public opinion regarding the Israel-Hamas war, and suggest ways in which the power of social media can be wielded as a tool to promote peace and prosperity in the "day after" scenario.

## Shifting Narratives

Immediately after the outbreak of the October 7th war, the media at large was quick to own the tone of the narratives and perceptions of the events in the Middle East and across the globe. The media scene, dominated by both traditional media outlets and social media channels, used its immense influence to quickly shape and solidify public opinion in the Middle East.

News Outlet	War	Genocide	Death Toll Sources	Overall Coverage
Al-Arabiya	War on Gaza, Gaza war, Israeli Aggression	Avoided	Gaza Health Ministry	<i>Balanced in support of Gazans</i>
Arab News	War in Gaza/ Conflict	Avoided	Gaza Health Ministry – Ministry Run by Hamas (at times)	<i>Balanced in support of Gazans</i>
Al Jazeera	War on Gaza Israel Aggression	Mentioned	Gaza Health Ministry	<i>Biased in support of Gazans</i>
BBC	Israel/Gaza Israel/Hamas	Avoided	Ministry run by Hamas (at times)	<i>Balanced in support of Israel</i>
CNN	Israel/Hamas war Israel/Gaza war War in Gaza	Avoided	Gaza Ministry/Ministry run by Hamas (at times)	<i>Balanced in support of Israel</i>

### Sources and Terminology

Many traditional media outlets refer to the conflict as the Israel-Hamas war.<sup>4</sup> This title for the military conflict emphasizes Israel’s just war against radical terrorists who seek Israel’s destruction. Several Arab media outlets, on the other hand, often refer to this round of fighting as the Israel-Gaza war, which portrays Israel as an aggressor, waging war against the civilians of the Gaza Strip, and not specifically members of Hamas. Some traditional Western media outlets have even begun referring to the conflict as the Israel-Gaza war, or the War in Gaza. The change in the basic naming of the war can be attributed to the ongoing pressure on such media outlets, which had initially shown leniency towards Israel’s military actions. Many journalists have also adopted a more aggressive tone towards Israel as the death toll rises in Gaza.

Additionally, many Western media outlets, like CNN and the BBC, refer to sources in Gaza, such as the health ministry, as the ‘Hamas-run health ministry.’ For example, the BBC ran the headline, “More than 40,000 killed in Gaza, Hamas-run Health Ministry Says.”<sup>5</sup> Similarly, CNN wrote, “In the first two months of the war, at least 17,100 Palestinians were killed in Israeli attacks on the strip, according to the Hamas-run Gaza Health Ministry.”<sup>6</sup> This wording reinforces the fact that Israel is fighting against a terrorist organization, thus adding a level

of doubt to the number of casualties. Because the health ministry is run by Hamas, these media outlets intend for their audiences to take the reports with a grain of salt. This same reference is occasionally used by some Middle Eastern media outlets, like Arab News, which are not sympathetic toward Hamas and reflect a more moderate tone. Those seeking to portray Israel’s crimes against humanity refer to the health ministry as the Gaza Health Ministry, giving it a sense of international legitimacy.<sup>7</sup>

### Who is Setting the Narrative in Traditional Media

While multiple news outlets have emerged in the Middle East in the past decade, Al-Arabiya and Al Jazeera remain as the most influential news outlets in the region. Hence, the views expressed by these two outlets greatly affect public opinion and perceptions of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, noting that both channels also have a strong presence on social media networks.<sup>8</sup> However, on many issues, these top two most influential outlets follow different guidelines and promote different narratives, including when it comes to the war in Gaza.

The table above explores how some of the central news outlets in the region describe key concepts about the war and whether their overall coverage



is currently **Balanced or Biased**, noting the key role such narratives play in shaping public opinion.

## The Social Media Scene

### Information Warfare

The war of information fought across social media channels is the source for much of the discourse surrounding the conflict. In a region where the average citizen spends two hours a day on social media and 36% of citizens use social media as their main source of news, social media plays a vital role in shaping public opinion. In Saudi Arabia users reached an average of 12 hours per day, and in the UAE, where users spend 11.5 hours per day on social media, the trending themes are essentially cultural truths.<sup>9</sup>

Supporters of all parties in the conflict claim that global media outlets are misrepresenting the situation – either by downplaying the casualties and humanitarian crisis in Gaza or by magnifying the situation, exaggerating the number of civilian deaths, and painting Israel as genocidal. Videos, images, and narratives pushed by media outlets on social media dominate the scene as they are the primary source of information. Both sides accuse each other of spreading misinformation, with narratives such as Hamas exploiting civilians and Israel carrying uncalculated strikes to eradicate the citizens of Gaza are among the main issues causing a rift on social media.

## The Online Discourse

### Divisive Narratives, Trending Discourses

The online conversation around the war in Gaza is shaped by several dominant themes. On Arab social media, trending voices highlight claims of “genocide,” the starvation of Gaza, the humanitarian crisis, and the struggle for Al-Aqsa and Palestinian statehood, often with a strong critique of Israel and the Netanyahu government. A minority

view presents an opposing narrative, criticizing Islamist factions like Hamas, Hezbollah, and Iran.

## Genocide/Humanitarian Crisis

Genocide has successfully become one of the most used words on social media in reference to Israel’s military operations in Gaza. While the exact definition of genocide and its applicability to the current war remains questionable, many have elected to portray it as such. The word has certainly promoted the idea of extreme human rights violations in making a case against Israel in the international community. A majority of regional and global news outlets avoid using the term. Genocide is only heavily used by one major news outlet, Al Jazeera, and is heavily promoted on all social media platforms. The genocide narrative is an old narrative mostly used to describe Israel’s actions toward the Palestinians, and is not a product of October 7. The widely circulated images of dead Palestinian children and the destruction and displacement in Gaza with the word genocide have made their way into global prominence. The precise definition and the applicability of the term genocide to the actions of Israel are sidelined, while emotions are heightened due to the tragic and heartfelt images.



*The comparison between the Holocaust and the plight of Palestinians is a growing trend on social*

media. This parallel serves to highlight the gravity of the conflict in Palestine. By likening the situation in Palestine to the most horrific atrocity of modern history—one that resonates deeply with Western audiences—it sends a pointed message to both Western observers and supporters of Israel. Given that the Holocaust played a vital role in justifying the right to self-determination for the Jewish people through the establishment of Israel, this comparison implicitly argues for a similar recognition of Palestinian aspirations in the present day.



## Humanitarian Crisis

The widespread use of images depicting destruction and suffering in Gaza highlights the scale of the humanitarian crisis. These images are often circulated by official Arab media outlets and social media users, aiming to amplify the voices of the Palestinian people on the global stage. In some instances, such visuals are used as part of broader political agendas, including efforts to tarnish Israel's international reputation by highlighting human rights violations. Images of suffering, especially those of Gazan women and children, are particularly powerful in drawing global attention to the conflict and advocating for a ceasefire or a long-term political solution. Thus, media outlets and social media platforms use these images strategically to reinforce their narratives and bolster their messaging.

## Islamist Discourse and the Al Aqsa Claim

Religion in the Middle East has always been a decisive factor in shaping public opinion and perceptions of political and social issues. Conservative Muslim Arabs, who view the conflict with Israel as a

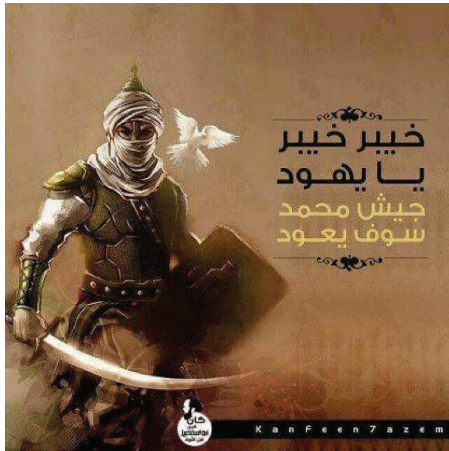
religiously inspired historic feud, are most certainly vocal against Israel. Their narrative is primarily focused on promoting a religious war and staking the Muslim claim to Jerusalem as the first “Qibla,” a holy site in Islam. Conservative Islamists tend to highlight historic religious wars between Muslims and Jews, such as the Battle of Khaibar in 628 AD. They associate all followers of the Jewish faith with the Zionist ideology, the state of Israel, and the current far-right government in Israel. Sects aligned with the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Shia school of faith, led by figures like Ayatollah Khamenei, follow a similar approach in addressing the conflict. Consequently, religion has led to a unified view among conservatives of both major sects of Islam.



“O God, do not raise a flag for the Jewish occupiers in Al-Quds and do not let them achieve their goals.”

This statement reflects a deeply religious and antisemitic tone. The frequent use of the Dome of the Rock as a symbol reinforces these messages, as it represents Palestine to many across the Arab world. Such rhetoric is often promoted by Islamists who view the conflict as a religious war against Jews.





*The image translates “Khaibar Khaibar O’Jews, Mohamed’s forces will return”. This is in reference to the battle of Khaibar between Muslims and Jews in 628 AD where the Jewish army lost to the Muslim army led by Prophet Mohamed (PBUH). The image is one of many on social media that reflect the use of religion in promoting the idea of war and strengthening the religious rift.*

## The Resistance Discourse

One of the most successful narratives is the portrayal of Hamas as freedom fighters. Social media activity across the region is yet divided between a terrorist Hamas and a freedom fighter Hamas. Following October 7, images of Hamas leaders and fighters started to be heavily promoted on social media with the intent of presenting the group as freedom fighters. Through social media, Hamas has therefore succeeded in presenting itself as the legitimate defender of the Palestinian cause, while many have turned their back on their political ideology and violent history. However, the group remains to be

widely considered as a terrorist and violent entity. Hamas’s moment of glory, social media dominance and legitimacy following October 7 remains to be a debatable issue in the region.



*Image of Hamas’ Yahya Al Sinwar “Oppressor of enemies”*

*Images glorifying figures like Yahya Sinwar, portraying him as a strong leader of the resistance, further strengthen his legitimacy in the eyes of many. The use of these images and accompanying rhetoric helps to solidify support for such figures, creating a sense of acceptance and even admiration on social media platforms.*



*"Zionists, killers of prophets. Even the Quran says they are traitors and cowards. The androgynous Arab Zionists believe they deserve peace and normalization as they attack Gaza's resistance, which confronts this Zionist occupation. May God reward the cowards."*

*This statement exemplifies antisemitism and hate speech, targeting not only Jews but also Muslims who support a balanced perspective or advocate for normalization with Israel. Such language fosters hostility, not only towards Jews but also towards any Muslim who seeks peace and reconciliation. The silence of moderates is often a result of the dominance of these narratives on social media.*

## Social Media and the Real World: Tools for Mobilization and Activism

Social media has successfully promoted various narratives regarding the conflict and has also led to the mobilization of supporters for rallies and protests across the region and the world. Social

media holds the power to share information and facilitates the organization of such gatherings. Overall, the public sentiment and social media landscape are filled with posts calling for a cease-fire, condemning the violence of Israeli forces, advocating for a free and independent Palestine, and criticizing global powers like the United States for its support of Israel.

## Rallies and Protests

The college protests across the US and the continuous rallies across the world are a direct result of social media activity. The anti-Israel movement has gained more momentum than ever due to the power and influence of social media channels. While many tend to align with one side or the other, some remain unnoticed as they promote moderate opinions, particularly in the Middle Eastern social media landscape. Social media has effectively played on people's emotions through the widespread dissemination of visual material such as videos and photographs.



## Boycotts and Shaming Non-Supporters

Pro-peace activists are often seen by many as traitors and supporters of violence. Boycotts have emerged as a result of social media activity, with heavily promoted campaigns against Israel and pro-Israel brands. Past conflicts have shown that boycotts do occur in the Middle East, but they usually phase out quickly. However, in this case, they are taking much longer to dissipate, perhaps due to the ongoing conflict. Many industries have reported the impact of these boycotts on their brands, reflecting the power of social media and its influence on consumer behavior.



### Alternative Discourses: The Pro-Israel Voice and the Arab Opposition Voice

The tone of media coverage is often biased toward one side as media outlet guidelines and affiliations are taken into consideration. However, individual journalists in several outlets tend to adopt a more moderate approach, emphasizing the need to release hostages, establish a ceasefire, and end the bloodshed. They advocate for Israel's right to defend itself while being critical of its military strategies and, at the same time, stand for the people of Gaza as they call for a ceasefire. Moderate voices tend to be the least prominent in the discourse, not necessarily because of the complete absence of them, but rather due to the lack of circulation of such perspectives. The owners of traditional media – with the exception of Al Arabiya – largely do not support these agendas and social media thrives on controversy and extreme opinions.

### Conclusion

The ongoing conflict in the MENA region is both reflected as well as influenced by the radicalization

of discourse on social media. Moderate voices are increasingly silenced, leading public opinion away from a narrative of peace and toward extreme positions that seek to encourage the “struggle.” While Hamas has garnered sympathy across the Middle East, with its soldiers portrayed as “freedom fighters,” and on the side of “justice,” Israel has struggled to effectively communicate its stance globally. Aggressive language and boycotts have persisted longer than anticipated, reflecting the entrenched nature of conflict-driven rhetoric.

Social media plays a leading role in shaping public opinion, with religion being a powerful tool in influencing discourse. Political agendas, driven by media outlets, state actors, and other influential institutions, dominate the narratives. These agendas often benefit from the polarized discourse, leaving little room for unbiased, moderate perspectives, which have largely withdrawn from the scene. The result is a void filled by the loudest voices, reinforcing divisive ideologies.

Moving forward, it is imperative to recognize the potential of social media, not just as a destructive tool of division, but also as a possible tool to promote unity and peace-building. Deliberate efforts must be made to moderate content, promote balanced narratives, and dismantle extremist views that encourage and perpetuate violence. Since October 7th, the rise of social media-driven humanitarian initiatives has shown how effectively these platforms can rally public support for meaningful and compassionate action when properly harnessed. However, more must be done to elevate and empower voices of reason—those committed to fostering dialogue, understanding, and long-term solutions. These voices are essential for shaping a regional discourse that embraces a more hopeful and prosperous future. Unfortunately, the current narrative is dominated by division and antagonism, which undermines efforts to build lasting peace and progress.

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# Regional Economic and Infrastructure Cooperation in a Post-Gaza War Middle East

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## Abstract:

The past five years in the MENA region have seen intensive efforts at intra-regional investment and economic cooperation, as well as transborder infrastructure linkages, especially regarding energy, transport, and communications. These include several extra-regional initiatives to utilize the region as a land link, or part of a multimodal transport link between Asia and Europe. These initiatives have become more germane, as the impact of Houthi violence on world shipping highlights the danger of maritime chokepoints and the need for redundancy in supply and trade routes. The driving forces behind much of the regional and bilateral cooperation plans are the UAE and Saudi Arabia, who seek to further their plans for domestic economic transformation and position themselves as the globally significant linchpins of an interconnected and robust regional economy. The turbulence after October 7 slowed some of these projects, especially those involving Israel, and it is becoming increasingly apparent that the drive and desire to integrate Israel widely may be declining. There is widespread skepticism regarding the likelihood of real success of multilateral trans-border regional projects in the Arab world; the past record doesn't bode well. The current situation in the MENA region is one in which a series of advanced bilateral and multilateral issue-specific projects and infrastructures exist. These projects and infrastructures resemble a series of Lego blocks, which could be linked together into larger and longer structures as circumstances and needs dictate.

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The past five years in the MENA region have been characterized by intensive efforts at intra-regional investment and economic cooperation, along with transborder infrastructure linkages, especially in the energy, transport, and communications sectors. On a broader scale, several extra-regional initiatives have been promoted by outside and regional powers, to utilize the tricontinental junction of the Middle East as a land link – or part of a mixed transport link – between Asia and Europe.

Several regional developments are key to understanding the current trends:

- Saudi Arabia and the UAE's desire to utilize accumulated capital to transform their econ-

omies, ensuring a continued commanding position in the regional and global economies both during and after the fossil fuel transition. These states are the key drivers of regional connectivity and industrialization projects and are the sole powers with the resources to promote their regional visions. They seek, according to slightly different but similar visions, to develop an interconnected and stable MENA region that will emerge as a global economic power, with themselves as its pivotal players.<sup>1</sup> Regional stability and crisis de-escalation are key to allowing these states to pursue their desired domestic economic, and, in the Saudi case, social transformations.

- Economic crises in significant countries in the region – especially Egypt and Turkey – afford a unique opportunity for these oil monarchies to create dependencies and embed economic influence through deft use of strategic investment, and to foster regional structures and infrastructure centered upon them.
- A four-year process of reducing tensions among regional actors: Saudi Arabia has achieved détente with Iran, Qatar, and Turkey and is open to overt relations with Israel; UAE with Iran, Turkey, Qatar and Israel; Turkey with Saudi Arabia, UAE, Egypt and, until recent developments, Israel.
- The desire of states traditionally in the American security orbit to pursue a foreign policy of “multi-alignment” and create regionally-based security and economic structures. Nearly all regional actors have rejected pressure from the U.S. to distance themselves from Russia and China. One strong illustration of this trend is the August 2023 announcement of the expansion of BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa) to include Saudi Arabia, Iran, the United Arab Emirates, Egypt, and Ethiopia.

## Inter-Arab projects and Gulf involvement in the Arab world

In recent years, MENA countries (notably, Egypt, Jordan, and Iraq) have discussed a series of joint industrial projects, interlinkage of electricity grids, and easing of cross-border ground transportation and pipeline links.<sup>2</sup> UAE’s Etihad Rail network for freight services was completed earlier this year, and is planned to be extended to Oman’s Sohar port and other GCC countries in the future. Saudi Arabia plans to invest 20-plus billion dollars to construct over 1,300 km of rail lines linking its Red Sea coast to the Eastern province.<sup>3</sup> This system, if developed, could link with the UAE’s, bringing continuous land access from the Indian Ocean (avoiding the Straits of Hormuz) to the Jordanian border.

Linkage of electric grids in the Eastern Mediterranean and among Arab states is one of the more

advanced areas of regional and extra-regional cooperation. The EuroAsia Interconnector Project is aimed at linking the grids of Greece, Cyprus and Israel, and the EuroAfrica Interconnector project (and newer green electricity schemes) seeks to link Greece and Cyprus with Egypt.<sup>4</sup> Jordan and Israel’s grids are already connected, and recently, a small-scale interconnection was inaugurated between Jordan and Iraq.<sup>5</sup> Saudi Arabia plans to construct a 1.8 billion dollar electricity interconnection project with Egypt by 2026.<sup>6</sup>

Abu Dhabi’s ADQ sovereign wealth fund, which is run by Tahnoun bin Zayed al-Nahyan, deputy ruler of Abu Dhabi, and the brother and national security advisor of Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed of Abu Dhabi, recently made a massive investment of 35 billion dollars (around 7% of UAE’s GDP) in Egypt. This money is ostensibly to develop resort tourism and real estate in Ras Al-Hekma on the Mediterranean coast. It stabilized the Egyptian pound and opened the door to other, smaller assistance packages, staving off an imminent collapse of Egypt’s economy.<sup>7</sup> The stability of Egypt is a key strategic interest for the UAE, as is embedding itself in the Egyptian economy through investment. Saudi Arabia’s PIF sovereign wealth fund has, for its part, created subsidiaries in Bahrain, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Oman, and Sudan to deploy 24 billion dollars in the Arab countries.<sup>8</sup>

Emirati firms and sovereign wealth funds have begun to invest and function heavily outside the UAE as part of larger economic development and diversification schemes. Abu Dhabi’s state-owned ADNOC, like Saudi Aramco, has recently begun significant investments outside of the Middle East (including in the US).<sup>9</sup> Both countries view and use their sovereign wealth funds, and more recently, national oil companies, not only as engines for growing and diversifying their economies, but as key tools of strategic influence. The UAE possesses a significant tool for influence and long-term infrastructure development in its highly experienced and globally distributed port companies, such as Dubai’s DP World, the fifth-largest container port operator worldwide, holding a market share of around 9% globally and 36% in the Middle East.<sup>10</sup>

Saudi Arabia and UAE's investment strategies are similar, focusing on controlling more of the value chain of fossil fuels, renewable energy technologies and hydrogen, logistics, technology, real estate, and agriculture.<sup>11</sup> Their parallel visions and programs are uncoordinated and competitive. There has been increasing tension in relations between UAE and Saudi Arabia, whose leaders were close just a decade ago.<sup>12</sup> A Western diplomat in the UAE notes that the UAE is more bold than Saudi Arabia, and is growing more confident now that Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman's economic vision is faltering.<sup>13</sup> UAE has not made a big issue, diplomats and academics in the UAE note, of Saudi Arabia's requirement that companies with government contracts need to move their regional headquarters to Saudi Arabia, a move aimed at Dubai; They note that support services and families remain in Dubai, which is much more attractive.<sup>14</sup> This competition gets more open further from the Gulf: in Sudan, for instance, the two support opposing factions in the civil war, and they compete openly in Africa. The tension between their agendas for regional and extra-regional development might in the end lead to heightened political antagonisms and divisions, rather than greater economic cooperation.

## Energy Cooperation Within and on the Margins of the Region

Both Saudi Arabia and the UAE are interested in strengthening strategic ties in the Eastern Mediterranean, and for the past decade have been developing strong security and diplomatic ties with Greece, Cyprus and Israel. This has taken on a new character and significance, as the Eastern Mediterranean gas market has developed after Israel's discovery of offshore gas deposits since 2009-2010 and Egypt's discovery of the major Zohr offshore field in 2015. Energy, especially gas, has been a major driver of intra-regional cooperation over the past decade. Today, Jordan and Egypt are reliant on gas provided through pipelines from Israel under long-term contracts (Jordan to produce electricity, Egypt to make up domestic gas shortfalls in exports and power provision), a fact that underpins and stabilizes their often turbulent diplomatic relations with Jerusalem. Israel is

dependent on the two countries – especially Egypt, which possesses the only gas liquefaction plants in the sub-region – as its only viable avenues for gas exports in the near to middle term. The Gulf states, rapidly expanding their own gas capture, production, and export capabilities, see possible synergies with the new EastMed energy market (as well as the Caspian one: UAE has significant investments and joint projects in Azerbaijan).

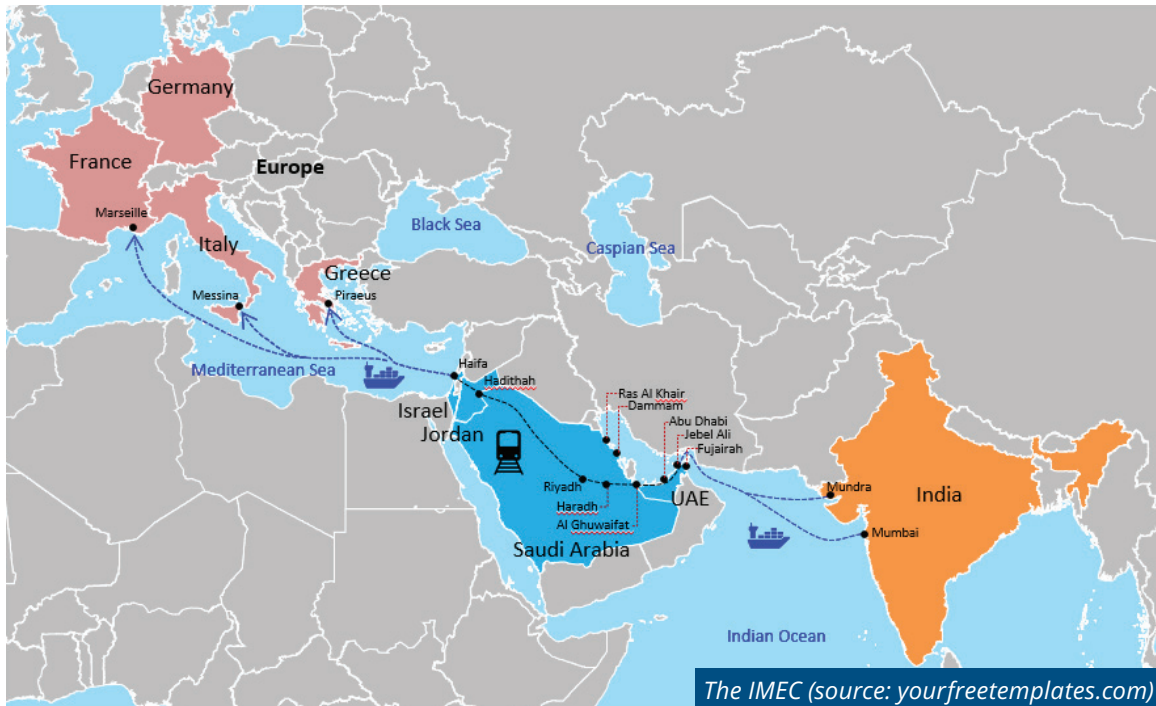
The Abraham Accords enabled these plans to move forward faster. In December 2021, Abu Dhabi's Mubadala sovereign wealth fund bought 11% of Israel's Tamar field; it also has shares in Egyptian fields. ADNOC and BP made a non-binding offer in March 2023 for half of Israel's New Med Energy, which owns a 45% stake in Israel's Leviathan field, as well as 30% of Cyprus' currently undeveloped Aphrodite field. That deal already faced problems before 7/10, and the two companies have since shelved the deal, pivoting towards a major investment in Egyptian natural gas; they have also expressed interest in investing in Cyprus, which has yet to begin producing from its gas finds.<sup>15</sup> This may indicate a shift in strategy, in line with Abu Dhabi's massive new investment in developing Egypt's Mediterranean coast, illustrating a declining willingness to invest in Israeli assets due to security and reputational risk.

## East-West and South-North Corridors

Most trade between Asia, Europe, and the Mediterranean Basin is carried by sea through the Bab al-Mandab Straits and the Suez Canal, around the Cape of Good Hope, or through the Straits of Hormuz. The concept of land, or combined sea-land, corridors connecting Asian and European markets through the MENA region is of course ancient. In recent times, the concept is most closely associated with China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), launched in 2013. 17 Middle Eastern countries participate in BRI projects, with Saudi Arabia and the UAE very prominent among them.<sup>16</sup>

Other extra-regional players have shown interest in creating corridors for economic and trade considerations and geostrategic aims, mainly to com-





pete with the Chinese project. Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi has in the past decade led an historic shift in India’s approach to the Middle East, downgrading relations with Iran and developing wide-ranging and strategic partnerships with Israel and Gulf states, especially UAE. The highly developed relationships among these countries, and between them and the U.S., led to the establishment of the I2U2 (India, Israel, United Arab Emirates, United States) Group – for public-private joint investments and new initiatives in water, energy, transportation, space, health, food security, and technology – in July 2022.<sup>17</sup>

On September 10, 2023, during the G20 summit in New Delhi, U.S. President Joe Biden announced the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC). IMEC would be a 5,000 km. maritime and rail trade route – including cables for electricity and digital connectivity and a hydrogen pipeline – from India through the Arabian Peninsula, Jordan, and Israel to the Mediterranean, which would reportedly cut transportation costs from South Asia to Europe by 40 percent.<sup>18</sup>

Even before October 2023, skepticism abounded regarding IMEC, termed an underdeveloped “PowerPoint project.” The conflicts seem to have put a brake on the initiative: follow-up meetings,

expected to begin within 60 days of the MOU, were not held;<sup>19</sup> One Emirati analyst opined that IMEC is not politically relevant at this time.<sup>20</sup> However, the UAE and India signed a framework agreement in February 2024 during Modi’s visit to Abu Dhabi, reportedly at India’s behest. The statement issued made no mention of any country apart from India and the UAE.<sup>21</sup>

In a parallel initiative during Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan’s visit to Baghdad in April 2024, Turkey, Iraq, Qatar, and the UAE signed an MOU to cooperate on the Iraq Development Road project. This is a 17 billion dollar venture aimed at establishing a 1,200 km. highway and fast rail project to link Iraq’s al-Faw port to Turkey and thence to Europe. The project would reportedly shorten the transport of goods between Shanghai and Rotterdam from thirty-three to fifteen days.<sup>22</sup> To a large extent, this project competes with the IMEC, which sidelines both Turkey and Iraq. It faces major challenges due to Iraq’s security situation, political volatility (the plan is opposed by Iran, Iraqi Kurds and Kuwait), poor governance, and dysfunctional institutions, which may deter investors.

The UAE seems to be hedging its bets by participating in both IMEC and the Development Road. AD Ports has already signed a preliminary agree-

ment for a joint venture to manage al-Faw and an associated economic zone. Both projects may be relevant for Abu Dhabi, affording redundancy, and, through the Development Road, potential access to the Caucasus and to Central Asia. Also, unlike IMEC or the BRI, The Development Road is not linked to the geopolitical agendas of extra-regional powers but is a regional project. In addition, like the massive investment in Egypt, involvement in the Development Road may fulfill Emirati geostrategic goals of stabilizing Iraq and embedding itself in its economy.

Militating for the eventual appeal of land or mixed sea-land corridors is the fact that the concept has recently become more attractive and relevant. Houthi aggressions in the Bab al-Mandab and the Red Sea (which necessitates lengthy, costly detours around Africa) have exposed the dangers of dependence on sea routes transiting maritime chokepoints, and the need for redundancy in supply and trade routes.<sup>23</sup>

## The Current Crisis and Israel's Place in Regional Economic Cooperation and Infrastructure Projects

Israel could be central to these emerging systems due to its advanced technology, its dynamic and globalized economy, and the fact that, along with Egypt, it links the Gulf and Eastern Mediterranean regional sub-systems, allowing greater integration between them, as well as overland trade flows from the Gulf to the Mediterranean, thence to Europe.

It is unclear how the regional conflicts developing after Hamas' attack on Israel have affected these vectors in the medium-to-long term. None of the treaty countries have suspended relations, though they have recalled ambassadors. However, the dynamics of regional economic cooperation and connectivity vis-a-vis Israel have been paused and may be re-routed:

A complex project, in which Israeli desalinated water would be provided to Jordan in exchange for electricity created in a large solar park in Jordan

to be built and funded by Abu Dhabi's Masdar by 2026, was suspended by Jordan in November 2023.

ADNOC and BP's anticipated purchase of part of NewMed has, as noted, been delayed indefinitely, and attention has shifted to Egypt (and perhaps Cyprus).

The agreement announced in June 2023 between Israel, Egypt, and the Palestinian Authority for developing the GazaMarine gas field 18 miles off the coast of Gaza by state-owned Egyptian Natural Gas Holding Company, would seem to be a dead letter.

As more than one Gulf analyst noted to me during a recent trip, Israel might be the most direct way to create a ground link between the Gulf and the Mediterranean. However, such a link could theoretically go through Egypt, Lebanon, Syria, Turkey, or even Gaza. Israel's connectivity to the Arabian Peninsula, one Emirati analyst stated, offers more to Israel than to the region; Even before 7/10, there was disappointment with the economic benefits of the Abraham Accords for the UAE (even more in Bahrain).<sup>24</sup>

The creation of regional infrastructure links that circumvent Israel might solidify its exclusion from regional integrative projects in the long term. In the view of Gulf businessmen and analysts, while investment and cooperation will probably continue in key fields which the leaderships define as critical – such as defense, medical technology, AI and agriculture – wider economic ties will suffer. Private firms and individuals in the Abraham Accord countries may choose not to trade with Israel or invest in projects connected with it for personal ideological or reputational (public criticism) reasons. As one noted: “they have other choices which don't have the same baggage”.<sup>25</sup>

## Conclusion

There is widespread skepticism regarding the chances of success of multi-lateral trans-border regional projects in the Arab world; the past record doesn't bode well. However, where two actors – especially if one is a wealthy Gulf state – have a

shared real interest in a specific project, it may well be implemented.

The key issue is the stability of political commitment over time. Several regional analysts have stated that the main obstacles to increased regional cooperation and shared infrastructure are political: sovereignty is tightly and closely held. One noted that the main barrier is “inherently capricious leaderships”. Others note the extremely circumscribed decision-making circles in what are largely “family enterprises”, which enables bold decision-making and focus, but also can mean decisions are not necessarily evidence-based, and can change sharply. This leaves broad scope for prestige considerations and personal strategic visions, which are not always translated into action and implemented well. Key individuals are tasked with several different and diverse issues, which can make them “absentee landlords, less concerned with detail and dependent on consultants.”<sup>26</sup>

Another point worth noting is that while UAE and Saudi Arabia “talk regionally,” at least Abu Dhabi prefers to “act bilaterally (or ‘mini-laterally’, with a small number of partners).” Their ambition is to create a regional reality in which they are the hub linking multiple, issue-specific spokes, based on direct relationships in which they are the dominant

partner. They view themselves as a global, not only a regional, player.<sup>27</sup>

The current situation in the MENA region is one in which a series of advanced bilateral and mini-lateral issue-specific projects and infrastructures throughout the region resemble a series of Lego blocks, which could be linked together into larger and longer structures as circumstances and needs dictate.

What this means for Gaza is not clear, but not encouraging. There is a political imperative now for the Gulf states to commit to contributing to a future reconstruction of Gaza, dependent on an end to the current conflict and commitment by Israel to a future two-state solution. However, the intrinsic instability of Gaza in the foreseeable future and its economic marginality militate against major economic players in the region’s taking on the sovereign risk of making regional infrastructure dependent on such a “weak link.” So, while Gaza may receive aid, and might be linked to future regional infrastructure projects (such as electric or gas supply networks), especially through Egypt, it will not be an integral part of them. In addition, any physical connection of Gaza eastward would require Israeli involvement and approval, causing more political complications for both Israel and the countries to its East in times of tension or conflict.

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# Assessing Saudi-Israel Normalization Following the Gaza War

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## Abstract:

The prospect of a Saudi-Israeli normalization agreement has been part of the regional discourse since the introduction of the Saudi Peace Initiative in 2002, gaining momentum since the signing of the Abraham Accords. In the months prior to October 7th 2023, an intense effort by the United States seemed to have brought Israel and Saudi Arabia to the negotiating table, advancing the process of engagement between the two nations. While the events of October 7th and the ensuing military conflict have halted these talks, the necessary “day after” discussions about rebuilding and revitalizing the Palestinian society may open the door to further Israeli-Saudi cooperation and reignite the normalization process.

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## Introduction

Soon after Hamas attacked Israel on October 7th, it became clear that Iran had aided the invasion both financially and strategically.<sup>1</sup> Many have posited that Iran’s involvement served to derail the progress of the Abraham Accords and the possibility of normalization between Saudi Arabia and Israel.<sup>2</sup>

In the months and weeks leading up to October 7th, Saudi and Israeli leaders made frequent public statements attesting to the deal’s momentum. In September of 2023, just three weeks prior to October 7th, Saudi Arabia’s Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MBS) publicly said that “every day we [Saudi Arabia] get closer” to normalizing ties with Israel.<sup>3</sup>

The surprise attacks conducted by Hamas on October 7th, followed by Israel’s military response, altered the trajectory of the region. Although the Saudi state is no fan of Hamas and considers the terrorist organization a direct threat to its domestic and international legitimacy, Saudi officials were slow to condemn the atrocities. When the condemnation of Hamas finally came, the Saudis also crit-

icized Israel for its forceful response to the Hamas attacks, which was seen by some as another setback to the broader efforts of normalization in the region.<sup>4</sup> In the aftermath of the Hamas attack, H.E. Rima bint Bandar Al Saud specified, “While Saudi Arabia recognizes the need for Israel to feel safe, it cannot be at the expense of the Palestinian people.”<sup>5</sup>

Altogether, if quashing the much anticipated Saudi-Israel normalization agreement was the motivating force behind the timing of Hamas’ attack, can it be concluded that Hamas and Iran achieved their aim?

## Israel Saudi Engagement

It is no secret that Saudi Arabia, led by H.H. Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman (MbS), was—and perhaps is—still interested in a normalization agreement with Israel along the lines of the Abraham Accords.<sup>6</sup> In 2023, there were numerous reports of ongoing negotiations between Saudi Arabia and Israel. Several Israeli officials, including Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, made both public and



private visits to Saudi Arabia.<sup>7</sup> Despite advancements on various elements of a potential agreement, a definitive consensus regarding the issue of Palestine remained out of reach. Saudi Arabia has always officially maintained that any agreement with Israel would have to include a solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.<sup>8</sup> The basic premise for the solution envisioned by the Saudis was previously outlined in the Saudi-sponsored Arab Peace Initiative of 2002. This proposed resolution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict called for a two-state solution based on pre-1967 borders and a full Israeli withdrawal from the territories occupied in the aftermath of the Six-Day War. In exchange, the 22 states of the Arab League would have normalized relations with Israel. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and his government, however, have maintained that they will not negotiate the question of Palestinian statehood in the context of an agreement with Saudi Arabia.<sup>9</sup> This is because Prime Minister Netanyahu believes that a future Palestinian state, established under the current leadership and political framework, would pose a serious threat to Israel's security. In turn, his policies have always been aimed at preventing a two-state solution. In the wake of the October 7th attacks, this sentiment has spread across the aisle within the Israeli political establishment. Before Prime Minister Netanyahu's July 2024 trip to the United States, the Knesset overwhelmingly passed a resolution opposing Palestinian statehood, arguing that granting it would effectively reward those responsible for the October 7th attacks by fulfilling their objectives. The results of the vote sent a clear message to the international community that, in the aftermath of October 7th, there is widespread resistance in Israel to the two-state solution.<sup>10</sup>

## The Opportunities and Risks of Normalization

Normalization with Israel through a deal supported by the United States can help Saudi Arabia bolster its international legitimacy, encouraging foreign investment and tourism. This development is crucial for Saudi Arabia's modernization efforts, aligning with the aims of Vision 2030 and the establishment of the model city of NEOM.<sup>11</sup> Moreover,

such an agreement may also provide Saudi with security guarantees, advanced weaponry, and a civilian nuclear program.<sup>12</sup> Despite the potential benefits of normalization with Israel, there are several domestic and international risks that Saudi will have to consider. For Saudi Arabia, these risks are less about its own national interests and more about the broader implications for the Palestinian cause. On the domestic front, backlash from the Saudi population is likely if the concerns of the Palestinians are not sufficiently addressed. In a representative poll sponsored by the Washington Institute, 96% of Saudis agreed that Arab countries should break all ties with Israel in protest of Israeli actions in Gaza, exemplifying widespread public support for the Palestinian cause.<sup>13</sup> On the international front, if an agreement with Israel does not adequately resolve the Palestinian issue, Saudi Arabia risks losing its position as a leading country in the Muslim world for failing to properly uphold its duty to the Ummah. Altogether, it is safe to say that, due to the anticipated risks associated with normalization with Israel, only a deal that adequately tends to the Palestinian struggle will bring Saudi Arabia to the table.

For Israel, a normalization agreement with Saudi Arabia may be seen as a turning point in the Jewish state's relationship with Arab and Muslim countries in general. Given that Saudi Arabia is home to the two holiest sites for Muslims and its leader serves as the caretaker of these sites, the country wields significant influence and soft power over other Muslim countries. Thus, Saudi Arabia's recognition of Israeli sovereignty would pave the way for increased acceptance of Israel within the Muslim world, both politically and religiously. Moreover, a Saudi deal would strengthen collaboration between the two countries to confront Iran and its proxies, especially the Houthis of Yemen.<sup>14</sup> Although there has been détente in Saudi-Houthi relations, the Houthis remain a long-term threat to the Saudi monarchy. The recent Houthi drone attack in Tel Aviv, which the Israelis countered with an air strike on the port of Hodeidah, exacerbated the need for a long-term solution to the Houthi threat in Yemen. On the flipside, the challenges of a Saudi deal for the Netanyahu-led government primarily revolve around the concessions that may be necessary concerning the Palestinian issue rather



than the relationship with Saudi Arabia itself. As perceived by the Netanyahu government, an agreement that provides for Palestinian statehood—or at the very least a roadmap to statehood—under the current configuration of Palestinian leadership, poses potential security risks for the State of Israel.<sup>15</sup> Backlash to an agreement with Saudi Arabia that addresses Palestinian statehood can also be expected from the more messianic sectors of Israeli society, which play a significant role in the current government. These groups hold a strong ideological opposition to conceding land in Judea and Samaria and aspire to establish Israel's expanded borders as described in the Bible.<sup>16</sup> The Abraham Accords and the trajectory of regional cooperation is generally popular in Israeli society, yet many are not prepared to see a Palestinian state as a result.

The intensification of the conflict has made it considerably more difficult to reach a consensus on Palestine's future, derailing further progression in the deliberations between Saudi Arabia and Israel. With public opinion in Saudi Arabia strongly aligned with the Palestinian cause, domestic and international pressure has made it impossible to reach a deal with Israel without adequately addressing the Palestinian situation.<sup>17</sup> Therefore, Saudi Arabia has decided to halt public talks regarding normalization with Israel. Although the Israelis are still drawn to forging a pact with Saudi Arabia, the prospect of major concessions to the Palestinians has made such a deal less intriguing in the eyes of the Israeli public.<sup>18</sup>

Backdoor negotiations between Saudi Arabia and Israel, with the assistance of the United States, have persisted throughout the war. In discussions with both US and Israeli officials, Saudi Arabia, along with other Arab partners, has expressed interest in playing a role in post-war stabilization efforts, including security arrangements and the rebuilding of Gaza. This offer has been conditioned on the complete cessation of all hostilities and Israeli guarantees of Palestinian statehood, which, as mentioned above, the Israelis are not prepared to make.<sup>19</sup> It is true that prior to the Hamas attacks, Saudi Arabia might have been willing to accept fewer concessions regarding the Palestinian cause in a deal with Israel. However, with the Palestinian

cause regaining prominence among Saudi and Arab populations and Israel's reluctance to reach a political solution, the Saudi government has reverted to the terms of the 2002 Saudi Peace Initiative, which, if implemented, could provide a concrete long-term solution to the Palestinian crisis.

While tragic and devastating, the destruction and violence that the region has experienced over the course of the last year has perhaps presented an opportunity to redraw maps and reconsider regional dynamics. Israel's success in neutralizing Hamas and Hezbollah, coupled with Saudi Arabia and its partners taking an active role in stabilizing the region and rebuilding Gaza, would demonstrate the strength and necessity of the agenda for cooperation and connectivity. The partnerships between Israel, the Saudis, and their Arab partners in the region are necessary to address the chaos invoked by Iran and its proxies will lay the groundwork for a potential Saudi-Israel normalization deal once the dust settles.<sup>20</sup>

## From Riyadh to Rafah

After more than a year since the start of the war, Israel has yet to completely eradicate Hamas and destroy its military capabilities, and Israeli civilians are still being held hostage in Gaza. Nor has Saudi Arabia, with its Arab partners, been willing to significantly assist Israel in dealing with the crisis in the Palestinian enclave. Moreover, the current Netanyahu government has remained stubborn and unwilling to address the future possibility of a Palestinian state, making it virtually impossible for Saudi Arabia to come to the negotiating table. Instead, Saudi Arabia appears to be working towards a bilateral agreement with the United States that will include the development of a civilian nuclear program and other security arrangements, which would be included in a wider deal with Israel.<sup>21</sup>

Of course, in an ideal world for the current Israeli government, Saudi Arabia would sign a normalization agreement without addressing Palestinian statehood and would agree to take part in the redevelopment of Gaza and the West Bank, making Israel more secure. What the Israelis must realize,

however, is that given the current sentiment and political climate in the region, Saudi Arabia would lose its legitimacy in the Muslim world by agreeing to such a deal. In turn, Israel would not gain the alliance it expects. Without Saudi Arabia's current level of influence over the Muslim world, a normalization agreement would not become the pivotal movement that Israel hopes for in shifting its relations with other Muslim countries.

Under the current circumstances of a right-wing coalition in power in Israel and with the continued hostilities in Gaza, a normalization agreement does not seem possible. The Saudis will need a negotiating partner that is more lenient on the Palestinian question. However, this does not mean the prospect of a bright future between the two countries has been diminished.

The steps already taken by Israel and Saudi Arabia including exchanging delegations, the opening of Saudi airspace, and other confidence building measures shall not be reversed. Anecdotally, there also seems to be domestic support for MbS, especially from the youth of Saudi Arabia, who want to move beyond history and open a new chapter of Saudi-Israel relations. This change in the perception of Israel is reflected in the statement made by MbS to *The Atlantic* in early 2022: "we do not see Israel as an enemy, but rather as a potential ally."<sup>22</sup> Although the Crown Prince's tone towards Israel has recently become more critical, this should not be interpreted as a shift away from the path toward normalization. The statements made in his June 2024 Eid ul Adha address, in which he described the Israeli atrocities in Palestine as heinous and expressed solidarity with his Palestinian brothers, may have been a show of frustration with the current Israeli government and an attempt to put pressure on Netanyahu to agree to a deal to stop the war, rather than a stern reproach on the future of Saudi-Israel relations.<sup>23</sup>

Additionally, the cooperation necessary for carrying out the campaign against Iran and the axis of resistance must not be overlooked. The threat to stability, peace, and prosperity posed by Iran and its proxies will continue to bring Israel and Saudi together to cooperate on matters of national and regional security. While Saudi Arabia's relations

with both Iran and the Houthis have thawed to a certain extent, Iran and its proxies remain the greatest external threat to the Kingdom. For Israel as well, as long as the Ayatollah regime remains in power, Iran will continue to be Israel's arch enemy.

In an influential article in the *New York Times*, Thomas Friedman, the author of the Saudi Peace Initiative, presented one of the most plausible day after scenarios. He sees Saudi Arabia playing a key role in the aftermath of the Gaza conflict, working closely with the Israelis to achieve peace and stability in Gaza. This relationship would require Israel and Saudi Arabia to come to an agreement, though, perhaps not as comprehensive as the Abraham Accords.<sup>24</sup> However, with the continuing military conflict in Gaza and Netanyahu's unwillingness to propose viable plans for the day after, talks of normalization between Saudi and Israel have stalled.

## Conclusion

Indeed, the attacks of October 7th have derailed the prospect of normalization between Israel and Saudi Arabia. However, as soon as the reality on the ground changes, the path toward normalization will be back on track. In the case of Saudi Arabia and Israel, the impediments to normalization have less to do with the two nations themselves and more to do with concessions to the Palestinians. And, because the long-term benefits of such an agreement remain intact for both Saudi Arabia and for Israel, the prospect of an agreement looms large. Indeed, perpetual war is not sustainable for Israel and the region. In the end, peace will be established through a political, rather than a military, solution. In my opinion, the Arab Peace Initiative of 2002, which received widespread support from leaders not only in the Arab world but also from Israel and other international bodies, can serve as a guiding framework for these discussions. Prime Minister Netanyahu and some of his extreme coalition members have persistently rejected the Arab Peace Initiative, and perhaps a change in government would be needed for Israel to agree upon a political solution.<sup>25</sup>

Hopefully, a Saudi-Israeli agreement that leads to a Saudi Peace Initiative 2.0, which recognizes

Palestinian and Jewish national identities, condemns anti-Semitism and Islamophobia, prevents all forms of terrorism, and normalizes all relations between Israel and the Muslim world, will transform the region and the world.<sup>26</sup> For a revitalized

Arab Peace Initiative that goes beyond rhetoric and words, a regional effort to implement a future deal is required. Although Saudi Arabia may take the lead in this regional arrangement, other regional forces will need to work together to keep the peace.

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# The Untapped Potential of City Diplomacy in Peacebuilding in the Mena Region

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## Abstract

Cities can play a significant role in international relations and in building bridges between peoples. This paper examines the role of cities and “city diplomacy” in promoting peace in the MENA region, particularly in light of current challenges and the ongoing reality of tension and war. Drawing from Ibn Khaldun, it highlights the significance of cities as cultural and economic hubs capable of fostering trust among diverse populations. With a focus on the rise of mega-cities, the article argues that urban centers hold unique potential for bridging intercultural gaps through “soft” diplomacy. By analyzing sister-city agreements and city networks, the paper argues that cities can shape a new regional narrative of solidarity. Case studies of Abu Dhabi, Essaouira, and Haifa demonstrate how city diplomacy can promote tolerance and multiculturalism. The paper concludes that cities can play a pivotal role in building sustainable regional peace in the MENA region.

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## Introduction

Cities, as centers of life, economy, and culture, can play a significant role in international relations and in building bridges between peoples. Ibn Khaldun, in his famous work, “The Muqaddimah,” discusses the importance of cultural connections and understands the power of cities as enabling spaces and intermediaries that foster harmonious relations between different groups. In light of the current crisis, it seems that the MENA region is in need of this ancient wisdom more than ever.

The Abraham Accords, signed between Israel, the United Arab Emirates, and Bahrain in 2020, and later joined by Morocco, Sudan, and Kosovo, marked a new and promising phase in the MENA region. These Accords led to the establishment of

significant collaborations in the political, security, and economic spheres, spurring the process of regional integration. However, the regional crisis that began last October has exposed the challenges and limitations of political and economic collaborations, which have not fully bridged the gaps experienced in the public consciousness across the MENA region. These gaps are not merely a byproduct of the current crisis, but are rooted in deep intercultural differences. The persistence of these gaps points to the crucial need for mechanisms and channels of civil, pragmatic, and “soft” cooperation that will strengthen connections between peoples. Through these mechanisms, it will be possible to build trust and establish a broader and deeper foundation among the people of the region, which will help ensure the continuity and sustainability of regional relations, even in times of crisis.<sup>1</sup>

In this regard, the integration of city diplomacy practices at the municipal level may be the connecting link between the regional and national agendas and the region’s inhabitants, most of whom live in urban areas. The city provides an organized platform for creating connections and partnerships with local, national, regional, and international actors. In the municipal system, there is extensive experience in integrating civil forces as part of urban activities. This includes religious, tribal, or community leaders; community-based organizations; youth, women, and minority groups; educators and trainers; parent associations, and more. However, it seems that cities in the MENA region have yet to recognize their potential for the development of regional and international civil connections. The aim of this paper is to examine the unrealized capabilities of cities and local authorities to enact change by promoting civil connections between communities, cultures, and religions in the region as part of the peace-building process.

### Emerging Regional Urbanism: Mega-Cities and Metropolitan Areas

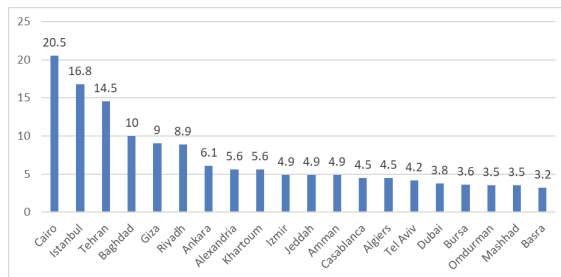
The MENA region has experienced an accelerated process of urbanization in recent decades, with more and more residents moving to large cities. However, urbanism is not new in the MENA region, where the first cities in history emerged about 4,000 years ago. Uruk, Abraham’s city in present-day Iraq, Jericho in the West Bank, and cities such as Memphis and Thebes in Egypt are just a few examples.

In cities, it’s all about the people who live in them. As of 2022, roughly 279 million people in the MENA region live in urban cities, constituting about 60% of the region’s total population. The urban population is expected to reach about 362 million by 2035, with an annual growth rate of 2.2% in cities compared to 1.8% for the overall population in the region.<sup>2</sup>

This trend is reflected in the MENA region with the emergence of mega-cities, where more than 10 million residents live, such as Cairo (20.5 million),

Istanbul (16.8 million), Tehran (14.5 million), and Baghdad (10 million). In addition, there are metropolitan cities such as Riyadh (8.9 million), Ankara (6.1 million), Casablanca (4.5 million), Tel Aviv (4.2 million), and Dubai (3.8 million), where millions of residents live. In total, the MENA region has about 70 cities with populations exceeding one million.

These cities have become major population centers home to young and dynamic populations, thus evolving into centers of culture, economy, employment, and education. Living in large cities provides access to new markets and exposure to new fields, such as technology, communication, tourism, and financial services. The population size in these cities is a key factor in their development as knowledge and technology centers, their ability to drive deep local changes, and their ability to address national and global challenges. Mega-cities, alongside other metropolitan areas, have become global centers that enhance the role of cities in driving profound changes at the local, regional, and international levels.<sup>3</sup>



Graph 1: Mega-Cities and Metropolitan Areas in the MENA region<sup>4</sup>

### Sister-City Agreements and City Networks in the MENA Region

Sister-city agreements, or ‘twin city’ agreements, are formal bilateral arrangements between two cities, typically based on a memorandum of understanding signed by the mayors of the cities involved. These agreements generally include broad statements of friendship and fraternity as well as agreements on collaborations in areas such as education, culture, tourism, environment, and more.<sup>5</sup>



The nature of city-to-city connections and their willingness and ability to operate in the regional and international arenas varies from country to country and city to city. This variability depends on structural factors such as the size of the country, the type of government, the presence of large urban population centers. It also depends on the degree of independence of city mayors, laws regarding a city's authority to create policy on foreign relations, and the existence of district divisions involved in regional and international development. At the city level, factors such as the city's size, whether it is a capital city, its position as a center for tourism and trade, and its cultural and heritage assets also play a role. However, urban characteristics affecting inter-city relations may also vary depending on the purpose of the collaboration.<sup>6</sup>

An initial mapping of sister-city agreements signed between cities in the MENA region and beyond provides a general overview and identifies the countries where urban diplomacy is particularly prominent. The following table presents the ten leading countries in the region by the number of sister-city agreements signed by their cities.

Num	Country	Sister-Cities Agreements	Agreements with MENA Region Cities
1	Turkey	795	91(11%) ,
2	Israel	366	4(1%) ,
3	Palestine	165	37(22%) ,
4	Morocco	132	32(24%) ,
5	Iran	100	29(29%) ,
6	Tunisia	100	36(36%) ,
7	Egypt	57	14(25%) ,
8	Jordan	38	12(32%) ,
9	Algeria	31	8(26%) ,
10	UAE	25	8(32%) ,
	<b>Total</b>	<b>1809</b>	<b>271(15%) ,</b>

Table 1: Countries with the Highest Number of Sister-City Agreements in the MENA Region<sup>7</sup>

At the top of the table, Turkey stands out with a significant lead over other countries in the region, with 795 agreements. This notable figure may indicate the implementation of urban diplomacy as a policy driven from a national-governmental level. A deeper examination of the Turkish case reveals that 90% of these agreements were signed after the Helsinki Summit in 1999, primarily with European cities. This trend likely reflects the use of

urban diplomacy as part of a long-term national strategy to strengthen civil, economic, and cultural connections between Turkey and various regions in Europe, thus improving Turkey's chances of joining the European Union. This is not the first time Turkish cities have been at the forefront of diplomatic activity as a strategy for joining an international organization. In 1958, the city of Konya in Turkey and the city of Torrance in the United States established a sister-city agreement as part of the Marshall Plan and Turkey's accession to NATO.<sup>8</sup>

Following Turkey are Israel with 366 agreements and Palestine with 165 agreements—two fascinating examples of relatively small countries in terms of land area but with significant urban assets. Israeli and Palestinian cities hold considerable religious importance for Jews, Christians, Muslims, and adherents of other religions such as Druze, Bahá'ís, Ahmadis, and others. The heritage and religious assets found in cities like Jerusalem, Bethlehem, and Nazareth make these Palestinian and Israeli cities significant attractions, encouraging many cities worldwide to establish sister-city agreements with them. Additional factors include the presence of active and engaged diasporas, as

seen with Israeli and Palestinian peoples, and the emotional connections that encourage private individuals to initiate city-to-city connections. Furthermore, the political significance of these cities acts as a driving force for inter-city collaborations as a means to gain official recognition, symbolic support, and "softer" solidarity.

Next in the table is Morocco, with 132 sister-city agreements, primarily with cities in France (29), Portugal (14), China (10), Spain (10), Palestine (9), and Tunisia (9). This distribution reflects Moroc-

co's strong connections with France, Portugal, and Spain, based on a combination of economic and cultural ties, as well as the presence of relatively large Moroccan diasporas in these countries' cities. Sister-city agreements in Morocco are part of a broader strategy to promote national goals through cultural diplomacy. Morocco invests significant resources in rehabilitating the kingdom's historic cities and preserving their cultural and heritage assets. Urban cultural richness, in turn, drives economic development through the organization of numerous cultural events and city festivals, attracting tourists and contributing to Morocco's overall branding and the development of economic and trade relations.

Although sister-city agreements are popular, their ability to advance the new regional order in the MENA region is limited. Their effectiveness in promoting tangible outcomes depends on municipal budgets and commitment by city officials. However, as shown in the table, most of these agreements tend to preserve the previous regional order, including rivalries, separations, and exclusion. Therefore, there is a need for creating a comprehensive multilateral regional framework that can support the process of rapprochement and generate a broader, more open community of cities backed by supportive budgets and resources.

In addition to bilateral agreements, there are also regional and international city-network organizations that promote inter-city cooperation and connections with other entities. Today, more than 300 city-networks operate worldwide, covering a wide range of issues. Notable examples include "United Cities and Local Governments" (UCLG), which brings together about 240,000 local authorities and cities from 140 countries;<sup>9</sup> the "Global Covenant of Mayors for Climate and Energy" (GCoM), including about 13,500 cities and authorities;<sup>10</sup> and the "Arab Towns Organization," comprising around 650 cities and authorities.<sup>11</sup>

However, regional participation in these city-network organizations is lacking or inconsistent, with few networks serving countries in the MENA region. Internal divisions within organizations often separate the Gulf region, the Levant, Turkey, and North Africa. For instance, Israel is often associated with

Europe rather than the MENA region in which it is located. Additionally, not all cities in the MENA region enjoy the independent operational freedom required to actively participate in such organizations.<sup>12</sup>

## City Diplomacy, Cultural Relations, and Peacebuilding

The development of city diplomacy is directly related to a city's pursuit of peace and reconciliation. After World War II, the desire to avoid the repetition of conflict encouraged the establishment of diplomatic ties at the inter-city level. Personal connections between citizens were intended to contribute to international understanding, promote reconciliation, and soften the harsh politics between states in the international system. Thus, in the wake of World War II, sister-city agreements were primarily established between cities in Germany, France, Poland, and the Soviet Union. In some cases, city connections even led to the establishment of official national diplomatic relations. Since then, city diplomacy has proven effective in building bridges, breaking down barriers, changing perceptions in conflict zones, and developing peaceful relations.<sup>13</sup> This trend continued through the Cold War, as cities sought ways to break through the "Iron Curtain" and promote cooperation with cities on the other side. An example of this is the network established between cities in the United States and Eastern Europe, which facilitated cultural, economic, and social collaborations that transcended official political tensions.<sup>14</sup>

Since then, city diplomacy has evolved as cities and local authorities have adopted diplomatic mechanisms traditionally prevalent at the state level to establish and maintain international relations. City diplomacy enables cities to focus on local interests, global issues, and challenges directly affecting their residents' lives. This approach gives cities a direct impact on issues such as climate change, economic development, migration, and fostering intercultural solidarity. City diplomacy can be seen as a subcategory of "parallel diplomacy," where non-state actors also engage in promoting international relations.<sup>15</sup>

City diplomacy combines intercultural and interfaith diplomacy to promote cultural relations between cities and to foster interfaith moderation and tolerance among different communities. It also includes economic diplomacy aimed at attracting foreign investments, promoting tourism, and strengthening local economic infrastructure through international partnerships. Additionally, humanitarian urban diplomacy addresses the provision of humanitarian aid, support for refugees, and management of crises and emergencies at both urban and intercity levels. These and other aspects highlight the crucial role cities can play in advancing people-to-people relations, peacebuilding, and sustainable regional and international cooperation.<sup>16</sup>

## Cities as Catalysts for a New Regional Narrative

To ensure the realization of the vision of the Abraham Accords, it is necessary to integrate the strengthening of political, security, economic, and people-to-people connections. Cities must play a role in shaping and spreading a regional narrative of solidarity while quashing notions of conflict and separation. The elements for this new narrative are already present in the region and its historical legacy, which is showered with examples of interfaith coexistence between Muslims, Jews, Christians, and adherents of other religions.

Peace is not merely an agreement signed between leaders. It is the result of a set of values embodied in a gradual and sustainable process of change and implementation. Shared culture constitutes an important source of “soft power” in the development of international relations. It enables the creation of trust, the dismantling of tensions, the promotion of shared values and emotional language, and a motivation for action. Cultural connections enable the articulation of a strategic narrative that can strengthen collaborations and enhance resilience against obstacles and challenges along the way.

A city is much more than its physical structures, buildings, and streets that shape its form. The significance of the city lies in its ability to develop,

express, and disseminate core values that can serve as a foundation for the new regional narrative. These values include tolerance, multiculturalism, interfaith moderation, respect for others, solidarity, and strong belief in peace. Cities with diverse ethnic and religious populations, or cities with a rich history and legacy, can become a community network of cities, thereby amplifying their multicultural narrative as a central motif in fostering the long-awaited regional peace.

The following section includes the case studies of three cities from across the region that have grown to become lighthouses of tolerance, multiculturalism, and interfaith moderation—Abu Dhabi, Essaouira, and Haifa. Each has its own context and characteristics, but share common ground in the values they have chosen to embed in their respective city narratives. Each represents a significant light, yet the untapped potential lies in their collaboration as part of a regional city-network for the future of the region.

## Abu Dhabi, UAE – From Economic Migration to Multiculturalism

The capital of the United Arab Emirates, Abu Dhabi, has experienced a significant demographic shift in recent decades, transforming it into a prominent multicultural and interfaith city in the MENA region. Since the discovery of oil in the 1960s, the city has become a major destination for migrants from Asia and the Muslim world, contributing to a rich variety of cultures, languages, and religions. Abu Dhabi recognized that the traditional national narrative based on a single Emirati identity no longer suited the new reality of diverse society. Instead, they adopted a new national story emphasizing cultural diversity as a primary asset.

Abu Dhabi’s new model offers a potential solution for sustainable migrant management while maintaining a sense of belonging based on individual contributions to city development, rather than ethnic identity. The sense of personal security and the separation between economy and politics contribute to Abu Dhabi’s success as a new urban model.

The city not only implements multiculturalism within its domain, but also promotes it throughout the region and the world. Examples include the “Abrahamic Family House,” an interfaith complex that encourages dialogue among Abrahamic religions, and “Hedayah Center,” focusing on combating extremism and promoting tolerance. The international conferences hosted by Abu Dhabi, such as the “Abu Dhabi Peace Forum” and “Global Forum on Tolerance,” demonstrate its impact as a global center for promoting multiculturalism.

### **Essaouira, Morocco – Cultural Diplomacy as a Growth Engine**

Located on Morocco’s Atlantic coast, Essaouira is a notable example of multiculturalism, tolerance, and interfaith moderation. The city has turned its cultural assets into an economic growth engine, primarily through numerous cultural events such as the Atlantic Andalusian and the Gnaoua Festivals, which enrich cultural life and fuel the local economy through tourism. The festivals have increased the number of visitors to the city and led to the creation of new jobs. The city’s Jewish heritage and its broader multicultural story are reinforced by projects such as “Bayt Dakira,” which was inaugurated by HM King Mohammed VI and with the initiative of the King’s advisor Andre Azoulay who is also a proud native of Essaouira.<sup>17</sup>

The strategic decision to invest in the creation of dynamic and living cultural spaces, rather than merely a museum, was a pivotal choice. Today, Essaouira, which was once home to nearly 20,000 members of a vibrant Jewish community, has almost no Jews left. However, Essaouira, and Morocco as a whole, have successfully integrated Jewish culture as an integral part of the Moroccan identity. This blend of tangible and intangible cultural recognition has become a significant draw for the Moroccan Jewish diaspora worldwide, who frequently visit as a gesture of longing and connection.<sup>18</sup>

### **Haifa, Israel – Coexistence and Shared Life Amid Crisis**

Haifa, the Israeli port city, was already a multicultural city during the British Mandate, where economic development and prosperity went hand in hand with migration. The city became a cultural center where artists, writers, and religious leaders from all parts of the MENA region met, with figures like Umm Kulthum and Mahmoud Darwish leaving a significant mark. The then-mayor, Hassan Shukri, ensured a status quo among the city’s diverse residents, helping to develop coexistence and the well-known legacy of Haifa since then as a lighthouse of tolerance and interfaith.

The current crisis in the MENA region has not diminished solidarity and coexistence within the city; rather, it has strengthened the sense of partnership among Jewish and Arab-Palestinian residents. In April 2024, Mayor Yona Yahav announced a program to teach Arabic to all students starting from the second grade onward to enhance shared life in the city. Additional initiatives include interfaith meetings and events such as the special conference hosted by Haifa University on religion and diplomacy, which featured participation from diverse religious and community leaders from Haifa, as well as local and international experts, researchers, and practitioners. These efforts underscore the city’s commitment to coexistence and illustrate Haifa’s renewed role as a beacon of tolerance, diversity, and unity across the region.<sup>19</sup>

### **Integrating Cities for a New MENA Region**

The MENA region, with its broad range of cultural, religious, and ethnic identities, requires a new approach that places civil and cultural connections on the regional agenda. Cities in the MENA region, with their unique advantage of serving as spaces for intercultural and interfaith encounters, can act as a driving force in advancing regional integration and fostering peace. By creating inter-city collaborations with an emphasis on intercultural connections, a regional inter-city bridge can be developed, strengthening and complementing existing polit-

ical and economic channels of collaborations and helping to promote mutual understanding among peoples. As the region faces complex political challenges, establishing a regional inter-city framework and effective cooperation mechanisms will translate the potential inherent in cities into tangible achievements. This will lay the required foundation for a sustainable regional order where inhabitants live in peace, prosperity, and well-being.

In reflecting on the untapped potential of city diplomacy in the MENA region, it is insightful to draw from the historical perspectives of Ibn Khaldun. In his seminal work, "Al-Muqaddimah," Khaldun emphasized the pivotal role of cities in shaping and influencing societal and political dynamics. Historically, cities were not merely centers of administration, but key players in fostering trade, culture,

and diplomacy. Their strategic importance was undeniable as they served as hubs for interaction and engagement.

However, as global affairs evolved, the prominence of cities in international diplomacy diminished, overshadowed by state-centric approaches and geopolitics. Today, we witness a resurgence of city diplomacy, with cities reasserting their roles on the global stage. This revival underscores the significant potential that cities hold in peacebuilding and regional stability. As urban centers continue to emerge as influential players in diplomacy, their historical significance, as noted by Khaldun, reaffirms the vital role they can play in fostering international cooperation and addressing local, regional and global challenges.

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