

**Statement of Ambassador (ret.) Daniel B. Shapiro**  
**Distinguished Fellow, Atlantic Council**  
**House Committee on Foreign Affairs, Subcommittee on the Middle East, North Africa, and**  
**Central Asia**  
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**“Expanding the Abraham Accords”**

Mr. Chairman, Madam Ranking Member, thank you for the honor of inviting me to testify before the Subcommittee on the subject of Expanding the Abraham Accords. It is a subject I am passionate about. For the last year, I have directed the N7 Initiative, a partnership between the Atlantic Council and the Jeffrey M. Talpins Foundation.

Our name — N for Normalization, and 7 for Israel and the six Arab countries that have announced any form of normalization with it (Bahrain, Egypt, Jordan, Morocco, Sudan and the United Arab Emirates — is a reflection of our belief that the processes launched by the Abraham Accords and other agreements signed in 2020, building on the peace treaties between Israel and Egypt in 1979, and Israel and Jordan in 1994, hold immense promise and possibility for a better and more peaceful Middle East and North Africa region, to the great benefit of U.S. interests.

We convene multilateral conferences that bring together government and non-government experts from these and other Arab and Muslim countries to develop proposals for projects that can bring the maximum benefit of normalized relations to their citizens. In December, our N7 Conference on Education and Coexistence in Morocco was attended by some fifty education ministry officials, teachers, university administrators, and interfaith and coexistence NGOs from eight countries. We shared the proposals generated with the U.S. and regional governments, and will soon issue a published report. Our upcoming conference on Agriculture, Water, and Food Security will have an even more diverse list of attendees. Several additional conferences are planned in the months ahead.

When I last testified before the Subcommittee six months ago, I was able to cite significant progress in building on the Abraham Accords, thanks in no small part to the commitment of the Biden Administration to advancing them. Looking back over 2022 in its entirety, we can cite several examples: The Negev Summit, convened in Israel in March by then-Foreign Minister Yair Lapid, with Secretary of State Blinken and the foreign ministers of Bahrain, Egypt, Morocco and the UAE in attendance; the launch of the Negev Forum, a permanent grouping of those six states, at a steering committee meeting in June in Bahrain; visits by Israeli Prime Ministers Bennett and Lapid, President Herzog, the IDF Chief of Staff, and numerous other Israeli ministers to the UAE, Bahrain, and Morocco; a five-day visit to Israel by UAE Foreign Minister Sheikh Abdullah bin Zayed; and, the opening of Saudi airspace to civilian flights to and from Israel, including by Israeli airlines, during President Biden’s visit to the region last summer.

In addition, the UAE and Israel signed a free trade agreement, and trade soared between them in 2022 to \$2.56 billion, more than double the previous year, making the UAE Israel's 16th largest trading partner. And under CENTCOM's sponsorship, joint military exercises and liaison meetings between Israeli and Arab militaries are becoming routine, and tentative steps toward an integrated regional air defense architecture fueled by shared intelligence, early warning, and missile and drone defense technologies, are underway. All of these steps are indicative of these nations desire for deeper coordination with each other and with the United States to address their shared threats, particularly those posed by Iran and its proxies.

The progress has continued apace into 2023 with the convening of the six Negev Forum working groups, with over 150 participants from the six countries — the largest multilateral gathering of Israelis and Arabs in some thirty years — in Abu Dhabi in January; the announcement of a cybersecurity cooperation agreement between Bahrain, Israel, Morocco, the UAE, and the United States later that month; and last month's opening of Omani airspace to flights to and from Israel, significantly shortening air routes between Israel and destinations in Asia.

I want to offer a few extra words about about the Negev Forum, and the major opportunities it presents. The fact that four Arab countries agreed to join Israel and the United States in a standing organization, named after a region in Israel, and committed to regular engagement of its senior leaders is remarkable. The six working groups — in security, education and coexistence, health, energy, water and food security, and tourism — all represent areas where there are significant needs shared by all the regional players, and significant opportunities for projects that will drive the ability of average citizens to discern benefits they accrue from the normalization of relations between Israel and Arab states. The experience of such benefits creates space for deeper support for integration from the publics, which in turn creates more freedom of action for leaders to take further steps.

The Atlantic Council's N7 Initiative has chosen to plug into the Negev Forum process. In consultation with the State Department and the regional governments, we aim to generate proposals for programs and policies that can be absorbed into the agendas of the working groups. For example, the report we generated following our N7 Conference on Education and Coexistence in Morocco in December was sent to the Moroccan and Israeli co-chairs, and other members (including the U.S. representatives), of the Education and Coexistence working group before it convened in January. Our detailed proposals included:

- 1) an N7 university consortium, designed to link academic institutions across the region with collaborative and bureaucratically simplified undergraduate study abroad programs; graduate and post-doctoral exchanges; a shared library network for digital holdings; a STEM education innovation center; a multinational student organization hub; and more.
- 2) an Abraham Open Academy, providing a dedicated online technical training platform through Massive Open Online Courses; expanding the skilled workforce in such fields as computer programming, data science, artificial intelligence, cybersecurity, and video game design; and generating online and in-person internship and job opportunities with

sponsoring companies to prepare the region's younger generation with the skills and experience required to compete in an information-driven economy.

- 3) Educational and entertaining reality-based television shows that promote tolerance and coexistence by highlighting the common religious and cultural roots of Arabs and Israelis, including life-cycle events, education, faith-based rites, arts, music, and cuisine.
- 4) Shared multicultural learning experiences for small groups of young Arabs and Israelis, with opportunities to travel and study together at key institutions that promote tolerance and coexistence and at historical sites of genocide and ethnic violence.

By the accounts of several of the participants of this working group, the N7 ideas featured prominently in the meetings and are part of the discussion of ideas that may receive ministerial endorsement for implementation by the Negev Forum governments. Our intention is to continue to funnel the ideas and proposals that emerge from N7 conferences to help put meat on the bones of multilateral regional cooperation as represented by the promise of the Negev Forum.

With all the progress one can rightfully point to, several real challenges remain to fully capture the opportunities at stake. The Negev Forum itself has certain built-in limitations. It is a consensus organization, meaning project and policy ideas are only endorsed if all six governments agree — and full consensus can be slow to emerge. There is even an argument that the United States' membership in the organization, while crucial for its launch and critical for the generation of ideas, also creates incentives for regional members to bargain with the United States on unrelated issues, which can hold up progress on regional integration steps themselves. In addition, a critical country with fully normalized relations with Israel — Jordan — has not yet joined the group. Significant efforts are underway to bring Jordan into the fold, which may also include adding a seventh working group in an area that needs significant multilateral work: trade. The UAE-Israel free trade agreement, and FTA negotiations between Bahrain and Israel only hint at what should be possible — a free trade zone of all the member states of the Negev Forum, and perhaps beyond. It may take years to complete, as such agreements often do, but discussions should commence now, as they will at an upcoming N7 conference on possible pathways to such a free trade zone.

Other challenges include the relatively low — and, by some polling results, declining — public support for normalized relations with Israel, even in the UAE and Bahrain, the most forward-leaning governments in building their bilateral relationships. It is difficult to know for sure, but it seems logical that spiking Israeli-Palestinian tensions and the calls by some Israeli officials to take steps that may amount to de facto annexation of the West Bank or to challenge the status quo at Jerusalem's holy sites weaken the popularity of the Abraham Accords. In recent weeks, the UAE and Bahrain have voiced criticism of Israeli actions, with the UAE going so far as to raise them for condemnation in the United Nations Security Council. And the next Negev Forum ministerial, which was expected to take place this month in Morocco, now seems likely to be pushed back until after Ramadan and Passover, which many worry could be a season of tensions between Israelis and Palestinians. (Unfortunately, these governments have not always found the same voice to consistently condemn Palestinian terrorist attacks that result in Israeli deaths.)

But even with these challenges, the Abraham Accords remain the most positive, most hopeful thing to happen in the Middle East in years. It still bears reminding that some of the diplomatic meetings, business deals, full tourist flights, security coordination, educational changes, and shifts in public rhetoric that now seem routine could scarcely have been imagined just a few years ago. And at the same time, they only scratch the surface of what is possible. With the remainder of my testimony, I would like to outline a number of steps that I believe hold the most promise for significant expansion of what has been achieved to date.

**First, our strategy should be to combine U.S.-led security coordination with regionally-led, U.S.-supported integration in civilian fields.**

We need to understand the interplay between the security cooperation made possible by normalization, and the wider range of non-security activities that can be undertaken. When it comes to building an integrated regional security architecture, there is no substitute for the United States as the convener, sponsor, and enabler. Our unique capabilities, our enduring presence in the region, and the way each U.S. partner looks to us to shape the security environment and coordinate responses to key threats make the U.S. role essential. Fortunately, the Biden Administration and the CENTCOM leadership have embraced this responsibility, sponsoring joint exercises that improve interoperability, facilitating high-level strategic discussions on addressing the full range of threats posed by Iran and its proxies, and initiating the gradual process of integrating air defenses across these U.S. partners. It is a long way from NATO, and it is not likely to become a Middle East NATO. Neither the United States nor our regional partners are likely to make an Article 5-like joint mutual defense commitment to one another. But it does not need to be NATO to be meaningfully beneficial for the security of all who participate. But what it does need, like NATO, is the energetic leadership of the United States.

Alongside the U.S.-led security architecture should develop a regionally-led web of non-defense integration. That is not to say the Negev Forum should be sidelined. It could only have been launched with the United States as a key player, and it will likely have an important role to play for many years. But at some stage, and sooner than later, there must be room for the emergence of a truly regional organization that weaves together: multilateral cooperation at every level and in every area of governance; collaboration and integration of resources and capabilities in energy, water, transportation, health, agriculture, and education; a regional free trade zone; and, reinforcing linkages between the private sectors, universities, professional organizations, religious communities, and other elements of civil society.

When this kind of organization emerges, the United States can, and must, be a key partner, hopefully *the* key partner. It can even assist, behind the scenes, in its creation. But it should not be a member. Just as the European Union and ASEAN have facilitated deep regional integration and the emergence of, respectively, a European and a Southeast Asian identity among diverse countries and societies, so should be the goal in the Middle East and North Africa. Let's call this

hypothetical organization AMENA, the Association of Middle East and North Africa. AMENA, which means “trustworthy” or “reliable” in both Hebrew and Arabic, will instantly signal, with trilingual clarity, that it represents a community of trust, reliability, common interests, and the common benefits of security and prosperity.

The advantage of this kind of regional integration is that it provides diverse ways for different countries to plug in, and maximizes the benefits they can draw out of it. It creates opportunities for the region to negotiate as a bloc with other powers and regional blocs — and again, the United States, the region’s key security partner, should be first in line — but without any outside actor becoming the pole around which organic regional integration activity revolves. As the participating countries benefit from this association, it will create incentives for other states to join, just as the EU and ASEAN expanded well beyond their original membership.

**Second, we should draw on all resources and expertise of the U.S. government, and beyond, to advance the U.S. interest in deep regional integration.**

There are, of course, many competing priorities for U.S. foreign policy attention. But for a relatively modest investment, there are broad resources available across the government to make the United States an even more influential actor in promoting regional integration. At the Negev Summit working group meetings in January, over 40 U.S. government personnel from some nine government agencies took part. That is a hopeful sign, and can be the beginning of a whole-of-government approach to advancing this mission.

While the State Department’s diplomatic role, the Defense Department and U.S. military’s security coordination, and USAID’s development expertise, under the guidance of the National Security Council, will always have the lead, every cabinet department has an international affairs department and most have resources and programs available to promote international cooperation that serves U.S. interests. The Department of Energy, USDA, the Department of Transportation, the Department of Health and Human Services, CDC, the U.S. Forest Service, the EPA, the Department of Homeland Security, the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum, the Department of Commerce, and more are all agencies that have contributed to advancing Middle East integration, or could be called upon to do so. The House and Senate Abraham Accords Caucuses are critical partners in this effort, able to use their diverse expertise and committees of jurisdiction to motivate and fund the work of the cabinet departments they oversee.

A number of proposals have emerged regarding a special envoy to advance the Abraham Accords, most recently in H.R. 1268, a thoughtful bill introduced by Representatives Torres and Lawler. There are arguments for and against such a position. As a diplomat, I am always inclined toward big diplomatic efforts, so I am sympathetic to this proposal, even as diplomacy is already being led by extremely capable professionals at the State Department and the NSC. Many of these talks must be conducted in secret until the governments involved are ready to reveal them. If Congress would create such a position to coordinate U.S. activity on advancing normalization in the Middle East, one of that official’s most important duties might indeed be to serve as the

traffic cop for an expansive and diverse set of U.S. government programs that support integration in various fields. This official might also partner with universities, the private sector, religious leaders and other Americans able and willing to lend their knowledge, expertise, and resources to supporting this mission. The mandate might also include recruiting additional US partners, like European governments, Canada, Japan, South Korea, and Australia to involve themselves in efforts to build on the Abraham Accords, as India has already done in the I2U2 format.

**Third, we must give special focus and priority to achieving Israeli-Saudi normalization, while recognizing that it will take time and may advance in phases.**

There is no question that such an agreement would have transformational effects, given Saudi Arabia's centrality and influence as a leading nation in the Arab and Islamic worlds. In some respects, we see it happening gradually. Saudi leaders now speak openly of Israel as a potential partner. During President Biden's visit to the region last summer, the Kingdom authorized flights to and from Israel through its airspace. Israeli businesspeople with second passports travel easily and openly to Saudi Arabia, doing deals. And there have been discussions around direct flights for Israeli and Palestinian Muslims from Israel to Saudi Arabia for this year's Hajj.

At the same time, Saudi leaders may believe they are already getting most of what they want from Israel — intelligence cooperation and technology — and they must modulate the pace of change amidst a flurry of reforms, which, while generally popular, occur against the backdrop of what has long been a very conservative society.

In part for these reasons, I would caution against the narrative one hears at times that Saudi Arabia is ready to normalize relations with Israel tomorrow, and all that needs to happen is that the United States must pay. In various accounts, if the United States provides enough weapons, security guarantees, civil nuclear technology, or relief for Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman from opprobrium following the death of Jamal Khashoggi, the deal is as good as done.

Saudi-Israeli normalization is certainly in the United States' interests, and we should be prepared to contribute, as the United States has done in nearly all previous Arab-Israeli agreements. But it cannot be divorced from the U.S.-Saudi relationship, nor from other U.S. interests that we must protect. If, in fact, the United States would be expected to provide a range of benefits to Saudi Arabia at the time normalization occurs, there will also be things the United States needs from the Saudis, such as confidence they will work to maintain a stable oil market, and will not act in ways that run counter to core U.S. interests, such as ensuring Russia is isolated over its unjustified invasion of Ukraine or preventing increased Chinese military presence in the Middle East.

A Saudi-Israeli deal is also unlikely to require nothing of Israel. Especially at a time when members of the Israeli government seek to make a Palestinian state and a two-state solution impossible, the Palestinian issue is unlikely to be something the Saudis will ignore. And the U.S.-Israel dynamic will also be complicated. There will be things Israel seeks, such as

additional security assistance, and things the United States may seek from Israel, such as steps to keep a two-state solution alive, or at least to prevent it from dying. Such an agreement would be a carefully balanced triangle. It is worth pursuing with significant diplomatic resources, but it is far from automatic.

In the meantime, additional ground work to prepare the Saudi public for this major change would be valuable. University exchanges between Israeli and Saudi academics, conferences hosted in third countries in which public encounters can occur, and more positive introductions of Israeli officials, history, themes, and culture in Saudi media would all shorten the path to the eventual destination.

**Fourth, even while pursuing the big prize of Israeli-Saudi relations, we should not neglect smaller, but still meaningful opportunities.**

Oman, Qatar, and Mauritania are all Arab countries that previously maintained some level of official ties — short of full normalization, but openly conducted — with Israel. The formula for the renewal of such ties, and following the lead of the Abraham Accords countries, will be different in each case, but steady diplomatic efforts should be conducted to create such openings, examining both what the United States and Israel can contribute, and demonstrating what the benefits will be of participating in broader regional integration. The recent opening of Omani airspace to flights to and from Israel is a welcome step which the Biden Administration worked hard to achieve. Sudan represents a significant opportunity to conclude a partially completed normalization agreement, but the United States should only give its endorsement when a civilian government has been restored to power, reversing the 2021 coup. To do otherwise would be to poison feelings about normalized relations among the Sudanese people, who otherwise generally support it or have no objections. And countries outside the region, such as Indonesia, Malaysia, Bangladesh, Somalia, and Niger, should be offered opportunities for gradual, low-level, business and people-to-people engagements with Israel, which, over time, can grow and lower the barriers to more official exchanges and normalized ties.

**Fifth, we should work to ensure that Israel's two original peace partners, Egypt and Jordan, are included to the maximum extent in regional projects and integration efforts, from which they can benefit.**

Egypt's participation in the Negev Forum has been welcome, but its level of enthusiasm for major undertakings — including those from which Egypt could benefit, like greater access to water recycling and conservation technologies, and expanded technical training for its younger generation — appears limited. Jordan has been active in water and energy projects, including the UAE-financed Prosperity Blue and Prosperity Green solar-energy-for-desalinated-water exchange with Israel, but it has yet to join the Negev Forum. In both cases, their publics have scarcely been educated for peaceful relations with Israel, even long after their peace treaties were signed, and, it must be acknowledged, they are sensitive to deteriorations in the Israeli-Palestinian arena.

Efforts to persuade Egyptian and Jordanian leaders to engage in greater participation in regional exchanges must continue, but there is also no substitute for them allowing a different narrative about Israel to be heard in their media and taught in their schools. Abraham Accords countries are now well ahead of Egypt and Jordan in reforming their textbooks to excise excessively negative narratives about Israel and Jews, and, more generally, to prepare their young generation for a modern, integrated, regional economy. They can be models and advisors to Egypt and Jordan as they go down the same path.

**Sixth, we should find ways to integrate the Abraham Accords with the Israeli-Palestinian track.**

We cannot ignore that the Israeli-Palestinian arena has reached a nadir in belief on either side that a resolution of the conflict is possible, or even desirable. Palestinian terrorist murders of Israelis, the significant expansion of Israeli settlements and legalization of illegal outposts, the revenge attacks in Huwarra, and the continued payment of salaries to Palestinian terrorists all signify a conflict that is not just stuck but getting worse.

This depressing reality and the complete lack of trust between Israeli and Palestinian leaders may be arguments not to pursue final status negotiations for now, and to focus instead on stabilization measures and improved economic and security conditions. But this unfortunate situation is not immune to all positive influence. In fact, if there is one potential source of positive energy in the Israeli-Palestinian arena, it is the Abraham Accords.

In conversations with younger Palestinians and those in the business community, they do not outright reject engaging in dialogue and even cooperation with Israelis and those Arabs who have normalized relations with Israel, as their political leadership seems to do reflexively. Regional gatherings of all kinds, from the Negev Forum to N7 Conferences, should make clear that Palestinians who want to engage constructively are welcome to come, to participate, to contribute, and to benefit. Under the sponsorship and leadership of the United States and Abraham Accords countries, Palestinians and Israelis may find their first opportunity for dialogue in years. That alone can create new avenues of communication and the beginnings of a reduction of suspicion. Palestinians may also be exposed to training and business opportunities they would otherwise miss. And, as partners to both Israel and Palestinians, and as supporters of a two-state solution, Arab states could be uniquely positioned to provide friendly, if occasionally tough-minded, advice to both sides about the steps they can take to ease temperatures and the things they must avoid doing in order to keep a two-state solution alive for a future attempt to reach it through negotiations. The United States can play an important role in reinforcing these positive messages.

I thank you for the opportunity to testify before the Subcommittee, and I look forward to continuing to work with its Members on advancing our shared goal of a more peaceful, integrated Middle East and North Africa.