

Examining the U.S. Interest in Regional Security Cooperation in the Middle East and North Africa:  
Opportunities, Obstacles and Objectives

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Chairman Deutch, Ranking Member Wilson, and distinguished members of the subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to testify on security cooperation in the Middle East and North Africa.<sup>1</sup> Options for a Middle East security architecture have been examined for years by scholars and policymakers, as the region remains the only one without an established, inclusive security organization. The 2020 normalization of four states' relations with Israel and an array of diplomatic overtures and rapprochements present new opportunities to increase collaborative security processes and structures. I will briefly summarize the U.S. interest in participating in such efforts and models that might be drawn upon, before examining the opportunities and obstacles that exist. I will conclude with thoughts about what a path forward might look like.

### **What Are U.S. Interests in the Middle East?**

The U.S. government has been seeking to adjust its Mideast policy for the past three administrations based on a bipartisan consensus that other challenges, in particular China and Russia, require relatively more attention. An enhanced security cooperation architecture can be part of an adjusted approach that serves U.S. interests and assures its allies and partners that the United States is not abandoning the region. An adjustment is in order for several reasons, but the assumption that the United States has no interests in the region is not supported by the facts. The task is rather to define U.S. interests clearly and align appropriate ways and means to support them. Global developments have led the United States to prioritize strategic competition with China and Russia, and increased U.S. energy production has greatly lessened the traditional U.S. dependence on Middle East energy sources. But core interests remain. In a public address last fall in Bahrain, the White House Coordinator for the Mideast, Brett McGurk, defined the core U.S. interests in the region as preventing a nuclear Iran, defending Israel, and countering terrorism. This short list is echoed in the public summary of the U.S. National Defense Strategy which states that the United States will retain the capability to “manage persistent threats” posed by Iran and violent extremist organizations.<sup>2</sup>

Beyond this short list, U.S. interests intersect with the Middle East in other ways. The Middle East is a major venue of strategic competition: China, which relies on the region for almost half of its oil

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<sup>1</sup> The term *Middle East* is used in this document to refer to the Middle East and North Africa region.

<sup>2</sup> U.S. Department of Defense, “Fact Sheet: 2022 National Defense Strategy,” Washington, D.C., 2022; and Brett McGurk, “Concluding Plenary Session,” speech at the International Institute for Strategic Studies’ Manama Dialogue, Bahrain, November 21, 2021.

imports, has become its top trade and investment partner.<sup>3</sup> Russia has conducted an equally aggressive effort to position itself as a provider of security, arms, and commodities in the region.<sup>4</sup> Iran not only poses a threat of nuclear proliferation but has also waged increasingly effective missile, rocket, and drone attacks directly and through proxies that threaten U.S. forces and U.S. allies and partners. The region's long-running conflicts cause significant human casualties, mass migration, and famine that spill across borders with significant consequences for the rest of the world. Climate change is creating additional destabilizing effects, and the pace of adaptation, economic diversification, and job creation in a region with an unemployment rate twice the global average has been inadequate.<sup>5</sup> Failure to address these long-term drivers of conflict will compound the unrest and spillover effects. To summarize, U.S. interests in the Middle East remain substantial, and pivoting away carries significant national security risk.

### Options for Security Cooperation Frameworks

The fact that the United States has multiple enduring interests in the region does not mean that U.S. policy should remain on autopilot because the return on our investment has not been positive over the past two decades. The U.S. government has begun a somewhat fitful adaptation away from direct military intervention and attempts to create outcomes via massive injections of mostly military assistance -- the Middle East accounted for more than half of all U.S. security assistance during 2001–2021. A new resource- and risk-balanced approach that protects U.S. interests and helps willing partners identify, prepare, and implement solutions for their deserving citizens has yet to be fully fashioned and articulated by the U.S. and its partners.

Last year I co-authored a RAND report, *Reimagining U.S. Strategy in the Middle East: Sustainable Partnerships, Strategic Investments*, that outlined how a new approach could be fashioned with the same level of resources by shifting investments to more-productive purposes with more-rigorous attention to promised outcomes.<sup>6</sup> Other elements of the approach would refocus from U.S. military action to diplomacy and incentivize others to assume larger responsibilities. The study suggests several measures, including the creation of an inclusive security framework wherein the countries of the region would do more for themselves collectively, with support from the United States and other interested outside parties. The study suggested that the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) might be a useful model to consider.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Dale Aluf, "China's Reliance on Middle East Oil, Gas to Rise Sharply," AsiaTimes, December 30, 2021.

<sup>4</sup> Becca Wasser, Howard J. Shatz, John J. Drennan, Andrew Scobell, Brian G. Carlson, and Yvonne K. Crane, *Crossroads of Competition: China, Russia, and the United States in the Middle East*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-A325-1, 2022, [https://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RR325-1.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR325-1.html).

<sup>5</sup> United Nations Development Programme, *Arab Human Development Report 2022*, New York, 2022; and Nader Kabbani, "Youth Employment in the Middle East and North Africa: Revisiting and Reframing the Challenge," Brookings, February 26, 2019.

<sup>6</sup> Dalia Dassa Kaye, Linda Robinson, Jeffrey Martini, Nathan Vest, and Ashley L. Rhoades, *Reimagining U.S. Strategy in the Middle East: Sustainable Partnerships, Strategic Investments*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-A958-1, 2021, [https://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RR958-1.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR958-1.html).

<sup>7</sup> Members of the Helsinki Commission have also proposed this model.

The OSCE, as the world's largest intergovernmental security organization, has demonstrated that it can be a vehicle for collective monitoring, observation, and peacekeeping activities that benefit its membership. It has also endured, having been established during the Cold War, and has proven to be a useful mechanism to traverse the immediate post-Cold War era and more-recent tensions, even if imperfectly. The principal relevant features to recommend the OSCE are its inclusivity of membership, its central purpose of serving as a venue for dialogue and negotiation, and the diversity of issues it addresses across three baskets: economic, security, and human. This holistic approach to security recognizes the multiple and reinforcing elements that contribute to security. Having multiple baskets also provides room for bargaining and trade-offs across the baskets.

The OSCE model is distinct from a collective security organization such as NATO, which is less appropriate and feasible for the Middle East. While the former is a cooperative organization devoted to management or resolution of conflicts, NATO is collective security organization whose members pledge to come to each other's defense. The OSCE has a more limited mandate than such mutual defense treaties as NATO and is instead devoted to management or resolution of conflicts. The variety of issues covered is another criterion; the OSCE covers a wide array of common interests in security, economic, and political issues, based on a holistic approach to security. Membership is another key criterion; among the most-inclusive organizations are the OSCE and the African Union, which provide a venue for entire continents to participate. Decisionmaking rules are another key criterion; these can range from nonbinding measures to simple majority, two-thirds, or consensus decisions.

An OSCE type of organization would provide a new capability for addressing Middle East conflict that does not currently reside in either of the current regional security cooperation entities, primarily by providing for more inclusive membership that also includes major regional powers. The two largest existing security cooperation organizations in the Middle East, the Arab League and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), are limited in membership—the Arab League to 22 Arab states, and the GCC to six Gulf Arab states (Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates [UAE], Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, and Qatar). The Arab League in its founding years focused heavily on support for Palestinians and has been inactive on many major conflicts, though historically it has mobilized forces on several occasions to deter state aggressions, brokered ceasefires, and mediated conflicts. The GCC has taken steps to form a customs union and common market, but its primary focus has been on security cooperation with concerns about Iran dominating the discussion. However, the six Gulf states have different perspectives on Iran, limiting the field for common action. The GCC formed a little-used joint force called Peninsula Shield. From 2017 until 2021, the GCC was rent by a blockade imposed against Qatar by Saudi Arabia, Egypt, the UAE, and Bahrain over the former's support for the Muslim Brotherhood. Efforts to expand GCC membership have thus far not borne fruit.

Forming an OSCE-like organization in the Middle East is a long-term project, however, that cannot be implemented quickly. It would require enormous effort and concurrence from the leading countries of the region, as well as the United States and other key international partners, which does not currently exist at the time of this writing. Such an undertaking would involve an iterative, phased process and key decisions around membership. In particular, it would entail a willingness to admit non-Arab members and a commitment to address conflicts in a diplomatic venue.

Recent developments do offer the opportunity to increase collaborative security efforts, and these efforts over time might lend themselves to iterative, progressive development of an inclusive security architecture. Driven in part by awareness that the United States needs to adjust its posture, major

countries in the region have undertaken a flurry of diplomatic activity over the past two years. Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Israel and to some degree Egypt have significantly improved their relations with Turkey, which has reduced its support for the Muslim Brotherhood and Hamas. Saudi Arabia and the UAE have also held talks with Iran, and a ceasefire in Yemen has been extended, which raises some hope of getting to peace talks. A negotiated settlement in the Yemen war would represent a major de-escalation of Iran-Saudi frictions and a precedent for addressing the conflict with Iran through diplomacy. Finally, significant openings to Israel have also occurred, via the *Abraham Accords* with UAE, Bahrain, Morocco, and Sudan.

### **Opportunities for Enhancing Regional Security Cooperation**

Three opportunities exist to build upon these developments and create expanded channels for regional security cooperation in the near term. They are: 1) expanding and deepening the normalization process between Israel and the Arab world; 2) reinvigorating efforts by the GCC to expand its reach; and 3) developing an integrated regional defense system to address missile, rocket, and drone attacks.

The so-called Abraham Accords were concluded with U.S. support between Israel and five countries (the UAE, Bahrain, Morocco, Sudan and Kosovo). The implementation of these accords, particularly with the UAE, which has most actively pursued an array of subsequent agreements, has produced a significant surge in trade, travel, tourism, and investment, with bilateral trade increasing to \$885 million last year.<sup>8</sup> The two countries signed a free trade accord in May.<sup>9</sup> The UAE, Bahrain, and Morocco have signed dozens of formal memoranda of understanding with Israel on a wide variety of economic, security, educational, cultural, climate, and other areas, which has led to a quickening pace of activities by the governments, the private sector, and tourists facilitated by a growing number of direct flights.

A widely cited RAND study, *Peace Dividend: Widening the Economic Growth and Development Benefits of the Abraham Accords*,<sup>10</sup> produced detailed estimates of the potential economic benefits that can accrue to countries that normalize relations with Israel. This analysis calculated benefits from expanded trade, investment, and tourism in terms of gross domestic product and job growth, which can help create knowledge economies and tech-savvy workforces. The RAND analysis also projected the additional benefits that would flow from additional normalization agreements, which would be even greater if they were to be plurilateral rather than bilateral agreements.

This analysis supports the case for expanding webs of economic, political and cultural ties that in turn increase security and stability. Economic benefits indirectly produce positive security effects by employing the jobless and creating incentives for stable relations among the signatories. Increased contact through tourism and a variety of cultural, educational, and other initiatives can foster greater understanding and religious tolerance, raising the prospect of a warm peace rather than the cold peace that characterized the previous normalization agreements with Egypt and Jordan. The Abraham Accords have led to direct security-enhancing steps as well. Israel signed bilateral security agreements with

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<sup>8</sup> Natasha Turak, "Israel Signs Historic Trade Deal with UAE, Its Biggest with Any Arab Country," CNBC, May 31, 2022.

<sup>9</sup> "Israel-UAE Economic Relations Grow Further with Free Trade Agreement," Al-Monitor, May 31, 2022.

<sup>10</sup> Kaye, Dalia Dassa, Linda Robinson, Jeffrey Martini, Nathan Vest, and Ashley L. Rhoades, *Reimagining U.S. Strategy in the Middle East: Sustainable Partnerships, Strategic Investments*. Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2021. [https://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RRA958-1.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA958-1.html).

Morocco and Bahrain and the exchange of defense attaches. In another move to increase Israel's connectivity to the rest of the region, the Department of Defense shifted Israel from its European Command to Central Command's area of responsibility, which has created a host of cooperative opportunities for dialogue, training, and exercises. Israel participated in joint naval exercises in the Red Sea in November 2021 with Bahrain, the UAE, and the U.S. Fifth Fleet stationed in Bahrain.<sup>11</sup>

The normalization process took an important step forward with the Negev summit convened in March. This summit moved the process from a bilateral to a multilateral format with the participation of the UAE, Bahrain, Morocco, Egypt, and the United States. Egypt's participation signaled its desire to join the Abraham Accords countries, accelerate its cooperative activities, and participate in a collective process. The summit participants agreed to create the Negev Forum to institutionalize their cooperation, with six working groups, a steering committee, and an annual summit to encourage sustained momentum. The six working groups enshrine a holistic approach to security by focusing not only on regional security but also food and water security, energy, health, education and tolerance, and tourism. A follow-on meeting established leads for the groups and a commitment to working group meetings and another ministerial later this year. Bipartisan U.S. support for normalization and ongoing U.S. participation in the Negev forum is important to maintain momentum and as a visible demonstration of continuing U.S. commitment to the region.

The second opportunity for increased regional security cooperation is the reinvigoration of efforts by the GCC to expand its reach. In July, the GCC met in an expanded GCC+3 format that includes Egypt, Iraq, and Jordan. Previous efforts to formally expand the GCC membership into a more inclusive security cooperation organization did not bear fruit. However, a regular +3 arrangement would provide additional inclusivity and opportunities for cooperation. There are natural synergies in defense cooperation because Egypt and Iraq are two of the most-populous countries in the region and thus can more easily generate manpower, whereas the GCC states are constrained by the small sizes of their national populations.

More generally, Iraq's relations with Gulf states have been increasing and producing constructive diplomatic and economic effects. Iraq has brokered back-channel meetings between Iran and Saudi Arabia, with active shuttle diplomacy by Iraqi Prime Minister Mustafa Al Kadhimi. Iraq has also concluded electricity, gas, and investment deals with Gulf states that will lessen Iraq's economic dependence on Iran. Egypt, Iraq, and Jordan have been actively cooperating in a tripartite economic development initiative for some time, and the latter two share Gulf concerns about Iran's increasing pace of drone, missile, and rocket attacks that provide a basis for expanded and sustained cooperation.

Making GCC a more effective organization also requires shoring up relations among the GCC members themselves, and there are signs that this is proceeding. Although the rift with Qatar was formally ended in a Gulf summit in January 2020, and MBS and Sheikh Tamim met last summer, further efforts to mend ties with Qatar are needed to provide a firmer basis for expanded GCC cooperation. In that vein, UAE National Security Advisor Tahnoun bin Zayed Al Nayhan visited Sheikh Tamim on the eve of President Biden's trip.

The third opportunity is a budding effort to develop a regional air and missile defense system to protect against drones, rockets, and missiles. This initiative is a narrower military effort than the security cooperation frameworks discussed earlier, but one with the potential to achieve a specific and well-

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<sup>11</sup> "UAE, Bahrain, Israel and U.S. Forces in First Joint Naval Drill," Reuters, November 11, 2021.

defined security objective, i.e., to provide early warning and defense against attacks launched by Iran and nonstate actors, such as Yemen’s Houthis, Iraqi militias, and others. Given the rising pace of such attacks, this initiative constitutes a critical security requirement. As a defensive rather than offensive capability, it would be non-escalatory and could have a wider effect in deterring aggression by Iran and others. Achieving deployment of such a shared system would also entail increased defense cooperation and information and intelligence-sharing among regional partners, who have traditionally relied on bilateral U.S. defense cooperation. This initiative could be a building block in a wider collective security framework that reaches beyond military and defense measures. Finally, a defensive system could help pave the way for an enduring solution to attacks from Houthis in Yemen via a negotiated settlement with provisions for border security.

Individual countries have developed varying degrees of missile defense systems. Saudi Arabia’s system has been successful in intercepting 90 percent of incoming missile attacks from Yemen launched by the Iranian-supported Houthis, as well as several drones. The UAE has purchased the U.S. Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) system and other defensive systems, and the Biden administration has recently approved requests for additional sales to the Gulf. Yet the quest for a multilayered integrated defense network—which has been championed in various quarters, including the United States, for years—has been unsuccessful. A concerted effort to build and integrate such a network, starting with an initial early warning and detection effort, would represent a significant move away from bilateral approaches to one owned by the region.

Israeli technology may be useful in building such systems. Israel’s Iron Dome antimissile and artillery defense system, supported by U.S. security assistance, has proven effective since its debut in 2011. Israel has conducted initial tests on Iron Beam, a cheaper laser-based system also capable of intercepting shorter-range rockets and drones.<sup>12</sup> The *Wall Street Journal* reported that U.S. Central Command organized a meeting in Sharm El Sheikh with officers from seven countries, including Israel and Saudi Arabia, in March to discuss coordinated air defense.<sup>13</sup> Israeli Defense Minister Benny Gantz publicly acknowledged the efforts to form a Mideast air defense alliance with Israeli systems and participation.<sup>14</sup> To encourage the effort to build a regional air and missile defense system, members of Congress have introduced the Defend Act (H.R. 7987), a bipartisan, bicameral legislative proposal that would require the Department of Defense to conduct a thorough study of the options and requirements for an integrated air and missile defense architecture and procurement strategy within 180 days of enactment.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Arie Egozi, “Iron Dome Laser-Based Option, Iron Beam, Takes Major Step Forward,” *BreakingDefense*, March 22, 2022; and Emanuel Fabian, “In ‘Game Changer,’ Israeli Laser-Based Air Defense Shoots Down Drones,” *Times of Israel*, April 14, 2022.

<sup>13</sup> Michael R. Gordon and David S. Cloud, “U.S. Held Secret Meeting With Israeli, Arab Military Chiefs to Counter Iran Air Threat: Meeting in Sharm El Sheikh Included Military Officials from Israel, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Jordan, Egypt, the U.A.E. and Bahrain,” *Wall Street Journal*, June 26, 2022.

<sup>14</sup> “Israel to Ask Biden for Okay to Provide Air Defense Laser to Saudi Arabia—Report,” *Times of Israel*, June 28, 2022.

<sup>15</sup> H.R.7987 - 117th Congress (2021-2022): DEFEND Act of 2022 | Congress.gov | Library of Congress

## Obstacles and Possible Pathways Ahead

All three opportunities—the expanding normalization process developed at Negev, an expanded GCC+3 formulation, and the fielding of a regional defensive umbrella to protect and deter attacks—have the potential to produce significant security and stability and to expand iteratively into more-comprehensive and inclusive security frameworks. One initiative does not preclude the other.

However, major obstacles to expanding the Negev forum into an inclusive regional security framework exist and will take time and action to overcome. The two biggest obstacles are anti-Israel sentiment in the Arab world and the failure to address Palestinian needs and aspirations to statehood. Two other chronic obstacles are differing priorities among Middle Eastern governments and a long list of conflicts and disagreements. These latter two obstacles impede progress toward an inclusive security framework even without Israel.

Although some countries, such as Somalia, are rumored to be potential normalizers, many governments and Arab publics remain opposed to normalization with Israel, and laws criminalize contacts. Iraq passed a law in May, for example, criminalizing travel to and business ventures with Israel. The Negev participants agreed to address Palestinian issues as part of the forum's agenda, but specific, concerted leadership on this issue by the United States and others will be required. Many countries will likely await Saudi Arabia's decision on ties with Israel, which is not in the offing in the near term. Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman said in March that "We look at Israel as a potential ally but before that, it should solve its problems with the Palestinians," as reported by the Saudi Press Agency.<sup>16</sup> That remains the Saudi position despite the granting of commercial air overflight rights to Israel over the summer.

Stasis in this issue does not bode well for the region. Trends in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict are not favorable, and an upsurge in violence can become a significant impediment to progress on regional issues—as UAE and others have noted in public criticism of Israel's treatment of Palestinians. In June, United Nations special coordinator Tor Wennesland reported on the dangerously degrading situation and rising violence and warned that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict cannot be ignored indefinitely in the absence of any concerted effort to revive a political process to resolve the conflict.<sup>17</sup> Regional security initiatives cannot be ultimately successful without more effort to address the Palestinian situation.

For all these reasons, pursuit of multiple overlapping initiatives is a more feasible immediate path ahead, given the region's numerous fault lines. The vision of an OSCE for the Middle East should not be discarded, but it will take time to lay the groundwork. The OSCE's formation was propelled by the postwar and looming cold war necessities, which bound countries together in a common project formed at Helsinki. Iran does not provide the same concentrating incentive for all of the region. Moreover, even Israel and its normalization partners differ in that Israel ranks the Iranian nuclear threat much higher than the threats from missiles, drones and proxy forces that most preoccupy the Gulf states. Iraq faces a delicate balancing act as Iran is both a vital economic partner and a disruptive neighbor.

Part of this incremental pathway forward might thus involve taking a wider and longer-term view of security and actions that contribute to security. In particular, the intersection of climate and security

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<sup>16</sup> "Israel, Saudi Arabia Can Be Allies if Palestinian Conflict Resolved - MBS," Reuters article published in [Jerusalem Post](#), March 3, 2022.

<sup>17</sup> "Tor Wennesland Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process, Briefing to the Security Council on the Situation in the Middle East," ReliefWeb, June 27, 2022.

deserves heightened focus. Discrete efforts have been launched, but more ambitious schemes are needed to address the region's chronic and worsening water shortages. These shortages, propelled by historic temperature rises as climate change proceeds apace, constitute a pressing humanitarian, economic, and security priority. The fact that the United Nations Conference on Climate Change (COP27) will be held in Sharm El-Sheikh in November, with a Green Middle East Initiative summit sponsored by Saudi Arabia and Egypt on the sidelines, provides an opportunity to deliver concrete actions and investments that benefit the wider region and especially those people in the direst straits.

An OSCE-type framework might emerge in an evolutionary way from these initiatives. The OSCE example of inclusive membership and a wide definition of security can help foster cooperation among adversaries in some areas, such as the environment, even if they are not ready to collaborate on more-traditional security issues. The organizing principles for an iterative approach to building regional security cooperation frameworks in the Mideast might be summarized as follows:

1. an inclusive approach to membership that includes outside parties with direct stakes in the region;
2. an incremental approach to building out a cooperation framework, recognizing that there is no one existential threat that unites all the potential members but rather an array of concerns and interests;
3. choice for engaging in some aspects of a cooperative framework, such as climate, health, or food and water security, while sidestepping issues on which domestic consensus does not exist;
4. a charter that allows more and less-powerful countries' voices to be equally heard through a majority or two-thirds decision-making mechanism and a commitment to pursue defensive, diplomatic, and otherwise constructive solutions to common problems.

## Conclusion

Progress toward greater regional security cooperation and development of an inclusive organization will not likely occur without active and sustained support from the United States and other external parties. Congress is providing important bipartisan legislative direction and support for these regional initiatives. The Israel Relations Normalization Act, which was included as part of the Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2022, calls for a U.S. strategy and roadmap to support normalization, as well as revived efforts on the Israeli-Palestinian file; it requires the executive branch to deliver an annual progress report that identifies roadblocks to "increased security cooperation, interoperability, and information-sharing."<sup>18</sup> Congress and the federal government may need to consider additional efforts to sustain progress toward an effective and inclusive regional security architecture. The United States retains significant leverage to influence actors in the Middle East in that it supplies more economic and military assistance to the region than any other country and has a history of continuous support and engagement. The leverage and interest are bounded, of course, and the United States can no longer dictate to the regional powers, if indeed it ever could. Many of them are diversifying their relationships to include significant economic ties and military hardware purchases with China and Russia. But the United States does remain a partner of choice for many in the region and shares common interests that provide a foundation for successful—if arduous—diplomacy.

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<sup>18</sup> H.R. 2748 — 117th Congress: Israel Relations Normalization Act of 2021." [www.GovTrack.us](https://www.govtrack.us/congress/bills/117/hr2748). 2021. July 8, 2022 <<https://www.govtrack.us/congress/bills/117/hr2748>>