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

Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member Wilson, Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today on the dramatic developments underway in the Middle East, the opportunities and challenges they pose, and the ways they can be harnessed to advance the interests of the United States.

To say that the diplomatic processes of the last two years in the Middle East are paradigm-shifting is to understate the case. For the first 72 years of Israel's existence, refusal by Arab states to recognize it or have normalized relations was the general state of affairs. It was importantly breached by Egypt in 1979 and Jordan in 1994 -- two countries that border Israel and had fought numerous wars with it. But those significant peace agreements did not produce major commercial or people-to-people ties, and all other Arab states — even those who conducted quiet security dialogues with Israel — considered normalized relations a bridge too far.

The sea change represented by the Abraham Accords signed by Israel, the United Arab Emirates, and Bahrain, and other normalization agreements signed by Morocco and Sudan, in 2020, have opened the door to a qualitatively different Middle East. These new relationships are characterized by public warmth, frequent high-level communication and meetings, and official encouragement to broaden and deepen bilateral ties through business, education, technology, and cultural engagements. In addition, previously sub-rosa security cooperation to address common threats is increasingly conducted openly, as Morocco and Bahrain have each signed security agreements with Israel, and Israel's inclusion in CENTCOM enables more regular and more intensive joint exercises, planning, and exchanges.

Today, I work for the Atlantic Council, heading up its N7 Initiative, sponsored by the Jeffrey M. Talpins Foundation, which successfully brought together senior officials from Israel and all six Arab states that have announced normalized relations with it, at a conference in late 2021 — the first and still only time such a gathering has occurred. We plan a range of additional conferences in the months ahead aimed at building multilateral connections across the bureaucracies of all of these states, and generating actionable proposals that feed into the work of the Negev Forum. I have chosen to engage in this work because I think it is critical that the United States seize the opportunities presented by the the Abraham Accords, and to do so in a way that enjoys broad bipartisan support. The views I am expressing in this testimony are solely my own.

I would like to make five key points about the significance of these agreements and the opportunities they present for the United States.

First, there is no going back. The leaders of the countries who have normalized their relations with Israel are doing it to serve their own interests. They see opportunities to cooperate more fully with Israel to deal with shared adversaries like Iran and extremist terrorist groups, to gain access to Israeli technology, to partner with Israel in key sectors like health, education, energy, tourism, agriculture, and water and food security, and to advance narratives of tolerance and coexistence that they embrace. The large number of agreements already signed — and those still possible — offer huge benefits to the citizens of the countries that participate. Their new relations with Israel have survived the inauguration of a new American president, an Israeli election and change of government, a war in Gaza, and ongoing periods of Israeli-Palestinian tension.

These moves represent not only a dramatic reversal of the the traditional Arab rejection of Israel over decades, but a direct break with the unified Arab approach described in the Arab Peace Initiative of 2002. That initiative laid out a specific sequence: first, a two-state solution between Israel and the Palestinians, and only then normalization with Israel. The Abraham Accords and other normalization agreements flip that sequence. It does not mean that the UAE, Bahrain, Morocco, and Sudan no longer care about the Palestinians or achieving a two-state solution. Indeed, the UAE made clear that normalization could not proceed if Israel decided to annex large portions of the West Bank. But it does mean that they were no longer willing to sublimate their own interests to efforts to resolve an utterly stalemated conflict.

That shift in prioritization of interests did not come from the United States. The Trump Administration deserves due credit for helping shepherd these agreements to reality. But the UAE, Bahraini, Moroccan, and Sudanese interests were the drivers. Even if we wanted to suggest a different approach — and I personally cannot imagine why we would — we could not. This trend is the new reality in the region. Those who, for whatever reason, want to stop or reverse it, will find themselves deeply frustrated and will miss opportunities of their own. Fortunately, the Biden Administration has recognized the significant opportunity they inherited and has moved to embrace and advance it, even as more can be done.

Second, the trend of normalization is highly unlikely to stop with the countries that have undertaken it so far. Other Arab states, seeing the beneficial effect on the interests of the first wave of countries, are likely to follow suit. The United States should encourage them to do so, and in fact, the Biden Administration has undertaken a number of such discussions. During President Biden's recent visit to the Middle East, Saudi Arabia commenced allowing Israeli civilian overflights of Saudi territory. That was a positive step, with full normalization likely to come later. But whether it is the Saudis, which I believe ultimately will happen, or other Arab states, additional countries are going to take this step. It reflects a deep attitudinal shift underway, certainly in the Gulf, but finding its way to other parts of the region as well. Arab leaders are

increasingly describing it as only natural that Israelis and Arabs would live and work together, both reflecting and encouraging a different outlook, especially among younger Arabs.

Third, normalization between Israel and Arab states presents significant opportunities to advance U.S. interests in the Middle East and beyond, working with an emerging coalition of U.S. partners that is greater than the sum of its parts. This coalition helps address major national security priorities, and enables a sustainable U.S. presence in the Middle East.

Achieving normalized relations between Israel and as many Arab and Muslim nations as possible is important to U.S. interests in its own right. Since Israel's founding, the United States, across administrations of both parties, has stood for the principle that Israel is entitled to the same recognition and legitimacy as any other country. It also serves U.S. interests when the United States' partners — as the nations involved all are — cooperate with one another.

But as normalization unfolds, it advances other U.S. interests as well. Cementing a coalition of U.S.-affiliated moderate states who value the collective partnership now being built can improve policy convergence and reduce gaps, including on issues where the United States and its Middle East partners have not always seen eye-to-eye, including Russia, China, Iran, and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Russia: The most pressing of these issues is highlighted by the dominant priority on the international agenda today, Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Countering Russian influence is not limited to opposing its aggression in Eastern Europe, but includes other arenas where Russia is active, like the Middle East. It is understandable that both Israel and Arab states have felt the need to tend to correct relations with Russia, given its active role in Syria, Libya, and other regional conflict zones, a reality reflected in the war's opening days. After some early hesitation — the UAE's abstention on a U.N. Security Council resolution condemning Russia's invasion, other Arab states' abstentions on a U.N. General Assembly resolution, and initial Israeli mixed messaging on condemning the invasion — the more recent trend has been toward clearer support for Ukraine in its fight against the unprovoked and unjustified attack. Certainly, the decimation of much of Russia's military in Ukraine and the collapse of its economy under crushing sanctions — as seems a very likely outcome — will cause many nations to understand that they need not balance their relationships with the United States and a weakened Russia, which can never provide the security partnership the United States can. But by being the key partner to the emerging coalition, we can emphasize that those who build partnerships with the United States need to stand with the United States when its most important interests are threatened.

China: One of the Biden Administration's overriding themes since day one — strategic competition with China — can also be addressed through advancing normalization. Given China's economic power and increasingly broad ambitions for influence outside the Indo-Pacific region, the United States must guard against the tendency of the coalition of its Middle East partners to drift to the East. A developing U.S. effort to raise with Israeli officials and the private sector the risks of Chinese infrastructure investment and access to sensitive Israeli technologies,

and ongoing discussions between the United States and Emirati officials about a reported Chinese military base under construction in the UAE, underscore these risks.

As with Russia, here, too, U.S. partners in the Middle East should understand Washington's expectations that their own bilateral relationships with China not be conducted in such a way that U.S. interests are harmed. The United States, in turn, must underscore its own commitments to addressing its partners' legitimate security concerns — surely not a role China is prepared to take on — and to exploring alternatives to Chinese investments and markets for technology that contain security risks. Gulf states' investments in the Israeli hi-tech sector is one such example. Israel and Arab states that normalize with it can serve to anchor these U.S. partners firmly in a U.S. camp, together with partners like the Indo-Pacific Quad members, Japan, India, and Australia. Already, India's involvement in the four-way I2U2 initiative with Israel, the UAE, and the United States, which President Biden highlighted with a virtual summit while visiting Israel in July, helps steer the leaders of the normalization process into this camp, which will be a critical element of our ability to out-compete China in the Middle East.

Iran: Another critical U.S. interest that is advanced by normalization is the need to counter Iran's malign influence and aggression in the region. On this score, there is no divide between the United States and its regional partners, at least on its importance, if not always on the means. It remains unclear at this time whether Iran and the United States will reach agreement on a return to mutual compliance with the Iran nuclear deal, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). But whichever way those negotiations turn out, there can be no doubt that Iran will continue to threaten U.S. partners and interests in the Middle East — either as a nuclear threshold state, in the absence of a deal, or through support for terrorist proxies, aggression by its own forces, and expansion of its ballistic missile and unmanned aerial systems programs with or without a deal, but with additional revenue from sanctions relief if a deal is reached.

Occasional high-level meetings, like the Negev Summit held in Israel in March, the trilateral Egypt-Israel-UAE summit that preceded it, and last week's groundbreaking visit of the UAE Foreign Minister to Jerusalem, are critical to generating trust between leaders and charting a common course on shared threats like Iran. As important is the practical security cooperation, much of it coordinated through CENTCOM, that enables joint training, intelligence sharing, and, over time, an integrated advanced air defense network. But more should be done to penetrate these partnerships deeper into the societies of the countries who have normalized relations. With the U.S. as a full participant — including by sustaining a credible regional military presence and enabling our partners to defend themselves — but with the regional players firmly in the lead, we can see the emergence of truly unified coalition to address Iranian threats. It does not preclude attempts at dialogue by those who seek it; both the UAE and Saudi Arabia, with U.S. support, have pursued such attempts at deescalation. But under the present Iranian leadership, there can be no serious expectation of a decline in its hostility to the United States, Israel, and its Sunni Gulf neighbors. Ensuring a deeply rooted united front to counter these threats is a critical benefit of normalization. It helps enable a sustainable U.S. presence in the region, with regional states in the lead, and the United States in an active support role, but not always at the tip of the spear.

The Israeli-Palestinian Arena: Finally, the United States should draw on expanding normalization as a positive source of energy — indeed, perhaps the only one currently available — toward keeping a two-state solution to end the Israeli-Palestinian conflict alive. There are no immediate prospects for any breakthroughs in this conflict, even as Israeli-Palestinian cooperation and U.S. assistance are focused on improving conditions for all parties and avoiding outbreaks of terror and violence. But a critical U.S. interest remains helping ensure both Israel’s security and its future as a Jewish, democratic state, the basis of the common values partnership that continues to enjoy bipartisan support in the United States.

Arab states may not place the same priority on Israeli democracy. But the welfare and rights of the Palestinian people still resonate among their publics, whatever frustrations Arab leaders might feel toward the current Palestinian leadership. This factor remains a source of sensitivity for Egypt and Jordan, and most certainly for a number of countries who have not yet normalized relations with Israel. Therefore, in addition to the interest they share with the United States in seeing that Palestinians achieve independence and self-determination in a state of their own, the ultimate fulfillment of normalization’s promise is most likely to be achieved in parallel with advances toward Israeli-Palestinian peace, not instead of it.

Under no circumstances should the United States hold out for conditioning further advances in normalization on specific steps toward Israeli-Palestinian peace. But given the continued concern about the Palestinian issue in the Arab world, an Israeli-Palestinian stalemate can continue to place limits on all that normalization can achieve. The situation calls for clear articulation by U.S. officials to both Israelis and Arab partners that the United States operates on an expectation that all parties will work to steer back onto the track of an eventual two-state solution, and to Palestinian leaders that they should get off the sidelines, drop their rejection of normalization and other unrealistic positions, and focus on how they can advance their people’s interests of achieving statehood by participating in what normalization represents.

Even on a very challenging issue like the war in Yemen, there may be a connection between regional integration trends and U.S. objectives. Dogged U.S. diplomacy led to the establishment, and then extension, of a ceasefire in Yemen which has provided welcome relief to the long-suffering Yemeni people, the unimpeded flow of aid, and a suspension of Houthi attacks on Saudi Arabia. But I do not think it is a coincidence that the Saudi decision to go along with the ceasefire coincides with the coalescence of a regional coalition and the deeper identification of the United States with that coalition. It certainly demonstrates that there is no inconsistency with the United States seeking to bring destructive regional conflicts to an end and endorsing the expansion of normalization between Israel and Arab states.

Fourth, to realize the promise of true regional integration, it is not too early to think broadly and long-term about what a multilateral regional architecture could look like.

There are many models to draw from, such as the G-7, ASEAN, the European Union, the African Union, the Organization of American States, and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe. While such a regional organization in the Middle East is aspirational at this point, it is

possible now to put in place some of the habits, practices, and exchanges that could improve prospects for its development over time.

The Negev Summit itself, now relabeled the Negev Forum, with the declared intent to feature a recurring meeting of foreign ministers with rotating hosts, is an important element of such an architecture. Summits of foreign ministers are important and valuable. Over time, the goal should be to arrange summits of heads of state/government as well. But the architecture should not be limited to those high-level gatherings. Senior leaders can make broad policy decisions and commitments, but implementation — and much of the innovation necessary to maximize the benefits — will depend on involving other elements of the state bureaucracies.

So one declared goal of the United States and its Israeli and Arab partners should be to begin regular (perhaps semiannual) separate meetings of counterpart ministers of energy, health, trade, education, tourism, water, agriculture, and defense. A look at the ASEAN structure, for example, reveals this type of interwoven series of meetings by ministers and experts across a wide range of issues, which follow up from the previous leaders' summit and feed into the next one. Similarly, the G-7 leaders' summit is prepared throughout the year by sherpas, who build on the previous meeting, using intervening meetings of finance ministers to reach decisions and advance the agenda at their level. Over many years, the Negev Forum or a successor process could mature into a year-round, overlapping, reinforcing set of meetings between counterparts that go beyond the areas of the Forum's six working groups. Civil society organizations and private sector entities in these countries could similarly organize themselves for regular engagements in a way that builds on the work of the governments. Additional multilateral negotiations could be undertaken in this forum, such as on an area free trade agreement, building on the free trade agreement signed by Israel and the United Arab Emirates. At a later stage, it is possible to envision an OSCE-like body, in which regional countries hold each other accountable for improving their human rights practices, which would reinforce U.S. priorities raised externally. Countries outside the region, including U.S. partners in Europe and Asia, could be invited to attend meetings as observers and, over time, establish partnerships with the regional grouping.

The net effect of this kind of structure — again, even if largely aspirational at first — is to draw many more elements of Israel's and Arab states' governments and societies into the process of normalization, to demonstrate deeper and broader benefits of normalization to larger shares of their populations, and to hold up this regional grouping as a club that others want to join. It creates a platform for Egypt, and, once it is involved, Jordan, to build on their leadership as the first Arab states to normalize relations with Israel, and work with the newer normalizing states to advance common interests across the region. The success of these efforts will build an ever-thickening web of ties between participating states, growing and expanding constituencies for peace and cooperation, and rendering a return to conflict simply unthinkable.

For the United States, there is obvious benefit in being seen as the key outside partner to this grouping, as it will help ensure that its direction over time is as aligned as possible with U.S. interests. As mentioned earlier, these interests include coordinating security cooperation toward

common regional threats like Iran, ensuring alignment of U.S. partners with U.S. interests vis-a-vis Russia and China, and the inclusion of Palestinians, both as beneficiaries of and contributors to the normalization process, in a way that both advances these positive regional trends and reinforces the goal of a two-state solution between Israel and the Palestinians.

Fifth, there are many specific initiatives that the United States can undertake to help sustain the momentum of normalization, address a range of regional priorities, and capitalize upon the opportunities to advance U.S. interests. Again, I believe the Biden Administration recognizes the value in engaging in support of normalization and has undertaken a number of useful steps. I offer this non-exhaustive, illustrative list of recommendations to encourage a continuation of a positive trend.

At the outset of this section, I would be remiss if I did not mention the important work of the House and Senate Abraham Accords Caucuses. These caucuses and their leaders, which include members of this Committee, are doing critical work to establish advancing normalization as a priority issue meriting sustained bipartisan support. I believe that it is a critical contribution to our national security, and I want to offer my support for their work. Many of these proposed initiatives are already drawing interest and support from the Caucuses, and others might soon be.

Broaden international participation in support of normalization. The United States' European partners, Japan, Australia, South Korea, and others should all be encouraged to take visible steps — as India has — to demonstrate support for additional expansion of normalization and for anchoring the emerging regional coalition firmly in the camp of U.S. partners.

Seek to pass a U.N. Security Council resolution giving voice to an international consensus that the normalization of ties between Israel and Arab states serves the cause of international peace and security. The UAE's current seat on the Security Council offers a particularly ripe opportunity.

Include Palestinians in normalization forums and activities wherever possible. Arab states and Israel, with U.S. support, should actively seek to demonstrate to Palestinians how they can benefit from such inclusion and participation. Meeting in Bahrain in June, the Negev Forum Steering Committee helpfully highlighted the priority of Palestinian participation in their working groups.

Establish new cooperative energy initiatives, building on the UAE-Jordanian-Israeli solar-energy-for-desalinated-water deal, such as investments in solar energy projects in Area C of the West Bank, renewing the "Gas for Gaza" effort through the East Mediterranean Gas Forum, and funding joint research and development cooperation on innovation in renewables and alternative fuels through grants from the parties that mirror the US-Israel BIRD Energy program.

Create a health training exchange for Israeli doctors, nurses, and hospital administrators to travel to the various Arab states for teaching purposes, and allow Arab medical professionals to

come to Israel for training in Israeli hospitals. Sheba Medical Center has initiated several projects along these lines.

Establish an Abraham Scholarship for students enrolled in joint degree programs between Israeli universities and universities in Arab countries which would identify top students from each of the relevant countries and provide full tuition, room and board, a stipend for expenses, and a support network of mentors.

Develop the Eilat-Taba-Aqaba area into a free travel zone for tourists to have a tri-national experience. Over time, the wider Gulf of Aqaba area could be integrated by establishing regular ferry connections with Sharm al-Sheikh and Neom.

Invite Israeli and Arab Chiefs of Defense to a regular CENTCOM-convened consultation on the most pressing security threats and mitigations, with a focus on expediting deployment of integrated air defenses among these and other friendly regional countries.

Establish a forum to share best practices and develop joint capabilities in emergency preparedness for natural disasters, building collapse, humanitarian crises, and the like.

Create an emergency food security fund, open to contributions from third countries, private sector entities, and philanthropists, to enable purchases of staples for regional countries from alternative sources in light of the Russia-Ukraine war-driven shortages.

These and many other initiatives would benefit from scaled-up and broadened U.S. participation, which the Administration and Congress can actively encourage. From the Nita M. Lowey Middle East Peace Partnership Act program, to NIH, to the Departments of Commerce and Energy, to the Development Finance Corporation, to universities, to the private sector and NGOs, there are numerous opportunities for U.S. leadership in convening, sponsoring, and supporting programs, conferences, and other gatherings that bring Israelis and citizens of Arab states together.

Those efforts can go hand-in-hand with focused diplomacy to succeed in getting additional Arab states to normalize with Israel, with early emphasis on Oman, Mauritania, Qatar, and Kuwait. Beyond the Middle East other candidates for normalization warrant attention, including Indonesia, Malaysia, Bangladesh, and a number of West African states.

In sum, the Abraham Accords and other normalization agreements offer immense opportunities to expand security and stability in the Middle East and North Africa, improve the lives of the citizens of the affected countries, and advance a wide range of U.S. interests. For all of these reasons, the United States should maintain energetic involvement in building on what has been achieved to date. And we should recognize that, as impressive and groundbreaking as what we have seen so far has been, it only scratches the surface of what is possible.

Thank you.