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Daniel B. Shapiro, former U.S. Ambassador to Israel, former Deputy Assistant Secretary of  
Defense for the Middle East, Distinguished Fellow, Scowcroft Middle East Security Initiative,  
Atlantic Council

*Hearing: Building a New Regional Security Architecture: The Next Phrase of the Abraham  
Accords*

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Chairman Lawler, Ranking Member Sherman, and distinguished Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today about the future of the Abraham Accords and the path forward for regional integration in the Middle East.

**What the Abraham Accords Launched**

As we approach the six-year anniversary of the signing of the Abraham Accords, it is worth taking a moment to appreciate what they represented. The agreements between Israel and the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, and Morocco, shepherded by the first Trump administration, were the first normalization deals between Israel and Arab states since the 1994 peace agreement with Jordan. The Accords showcased that these Arab leaders would not be bound by a decades-old paradigm that said broader regional peace and integration could come only after a comprehensive peace agreement was reached between Israel and the Palestinians. They were determined to pursue their own national interests, which they viewed as being advanced by being in partnership with Israel.

The Accords were a laudable diplomatic achievement, born of leaders' willingness to formalize previously covert relationships forged on the basis of mutual security and economic benefits. They also catalyzed a series of additional steps toward regional integration in the following three years. Months after the Accords were signed, the Pentagon shifted Israel from the U.S. European Command (EUCOM) area of responsibility to that of the U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM). The move was part of a larger project to build an integrated regional security architecture to complement the Abraham Accords and coordinate regional defenses against Iran. Although a formal regional security architecture remains aspirational, Israel's inclusion in CENTCOM has been an integral part of the security coordination required to defend against Iranian attacks, most prominently those aimed at Israel in April and October of 2024 and during the 12-Day War in June 2025. Since the war with Iran began on February 28, Israel deployed Iron Dome missile defense systems and personnel to the UAE, the first time the system had ever been deployed outside of Israel or the United States. Although Israel and the Emirates have long worked together on security issues out of the public view, this level of security cooperation would not have been possible absent the countries' diplomatic agreement.

In 2022, then-Israeli Foreign Minister Yair Lapid worked with the Biden administration to launch the Negev Forum, a framework for regional cooperation that included Israel, the United States, the UAE, Egypt, Bahrain, and Morocco, which focused on shared challenges in the fields of education, health, tourism, food and water security, energy, and regional security. The initiative made genuine, albeit uneven progress at the working group level, and plans for a second ministerial meeting in Marrakesh, Morocco, to be held on October 19, 2023, were finalized at the UN General Assembly in September of that year. That ministerial was derailed by Hamas' brutal October 7th terrorist attacks and the regional turmoil that ensued, but the Forum's envisioned expansion at Marrakesh to include Jordan as a full member, senior Palestinian Authority representatives as session participants, and other Arab and Muslim states as observers, was a signal that the Abraham Accords could be the start of a broader regional transformation.

The September 2023 announcement of the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC) at the G-20 summit in New Delhi was similarly encouraging. The project, once implemented, will integrate transportation, energy, and digital infrastructure to create a corridor stretching from Mumbai to Marseille and transiting through the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and Israel. Although this initiative remains stalled post-October 7th, the United States and regional leaders alike have worked to keep it alive. The disruptions to shipping through the Strait of Hormuz during the Iran War have only increased the salience of establishing alternative transportation and energy routes. Discussions at the Atlantic Council's IMEC conference last month reaffirmed all relevant parties' continued commitment to moving forward, especially in light of recent crises.

Tellingly, although the October 7th attacks managed to temporarily delay these follow-on integration efforts, they did not extinguish the Abraham Accords themselves. All bilateral relationships established by the Accords have withstood the enormous pressures of the last nearly three years. In addition to the UAE-Israel defense cooperation already mentioned, bilateral trade between Israel and its Emirati, Bahraini, and Moroccan partners, while subject to natural fluctuations in a complex security environment, has steadily expanded since the agreements were signed.

It remains very much in the United States' interests to expand the Accords. Such agreements provide the best path forward to broader regional integration, and the agreements have proven to be tangible steps toward the ultimate goal of peace and prosperity for participant states and their citizens. Expanding the Abraham Accords would entrench regional integration as an organic force to help stabilize the region through interdependence and partnership.

## Challenges to Expanding Regional Integration

However, expanding the Accords and reviving other integration efforts will not be easy. Israel's defense against Hamas was legitimate, of course. But popular opinion in many Arab states, shaped by images of civilian casualties in Gaza — of which there were far too many, both due to Hamas' use of civilians as human shields and insufficient Israeli efforts to minimize them — has turned sharply negatively toward Israel and deeply opposed to normalization, even as there is keener awareness of the threat Iran poses. The ceasefire and hostage release deal signed last October has provided some respite to Palestinians in Gaza. But the stalled implementation of President Trump's twenty-point plan — caused by Hamas' refusal to disarm but also hampered by Israeli actions and sluggishness by Arab states — leaves the issue woefully unsettled, and Palestinian civilian suffering continues, in full view of the same publics that regional leaders must consider.

Israeli public attitudes present their own set of challenges. Israelis remain understandably fearful of a repeat of an October 7th-style attack, and accordingly they are supportive of a more proactive approach to dealing with security threats, including holding security zones in Lebanon, Syria, and Gaza — an unsustainable policy if regional integration is to be advanced. Furthermore, the statements and actions of Prime Minister Netanyahu and his far-right coalition, including support for annexation and aggressive settlement expansion in the West Bank, attempts to undermine the Palestinian Authority, and turning a blind eye to the terrorism against Palestinian civilians by Jewish extremists in the West Bank — stymie Arab leaders' efforts to make steps toward normalization more palatable to their publics. Many Gulf leaders cite these factors and other Israeli actions, including its September 2025 strike on Hamas leaders in Doha, Qatar and its advocacy for an Iran war that has brought ruinous destruction on their territories, as forcing them to weigh the promises of the benefits of security cooperation with Israel to deal with Iran and its proxies against the risks that Israel itself may pose as a destabilizing actor in the region.

The outcome of the upcoming Israeli elections will be a critical factor in how much progress can be made on regional integration in the near future. While Arab public opinion toward Israel may not be meaningfully moved if an opposition leader triumphs over Prime Minister Netanyahu in late October, regional leaders will likely find a partner with far less baggage who is easier for them to work with on a shared integration agenda. A new prime minister would similarly have a chance to arrest the deterioration of Israel's standing in the United States, be a useful partner to President Trump in his final two years in office, and could be central to securing the president an enduring second-term achievement of expanded integration in the region. Meaningful progress with Prime Minister Netanyahu and his coalition still in office would be incredibly difficult, and in the event that no leader can form a government and Netanyahu stays on as interim prime minister while repeat elections are held, virtually impossible.

In previous negotiations with the United States, Saudi Arabia has consistently predicated normalization with Israel on a credible pathway to Palestinian statehood, but the war in Gaza has drastically raised the standard for steps to satisfy this requirement. Significant movement by Riyadh will require much more meaningful progress on the Palestinian issue than would have been acceptable before the war in Gaza. Material progress on the president's twenty-point plan — which, indeed, calls for establishing a credible pathway to a Palestinians state — would certainly help create the right atmosphere for Israeli-Saudi progress. However, the Iran War has stalled the work of the Board of Peace in rallying regional support for empowering the National Committee for the Administration of Gaza (NCAG), establishing an International Stabilization Force, and advancing reconstruction to benefit Palestinian civilians.

The Iran War, a strategic blunder on many counts, severely complicates the outlook for regional integration. Despite ongoing security cooperation, including Israel's defense of the UAE, many of the Gulf states are reappraising the risk of allowing U.S. bases on their soil as they question the reliability of U.S. security commitments, the coherence of our approach to Iran, and American appetite for sustained confrontation with Tehran. Throughout the period since October 7th, CENTCOM has helped maintain communication between the Israel Defense Forces and Arab militaries. But depending on how the war ends, its ability to serve as an integrator for practical military cooperation may face significant limits. With Iran's regime intact and weaponizing the Strait of Hormuz as an enormously powerful form of leverage, and no indication that periodic escalations will abate, Gulf states may worry about signing up to regional integration initiatives at a time when Israeli and U.S. decisions, in their view, are contributing to regional instability.

An additional new challenge is the rift that opened up between Saudi Arabia and the UAE in late 2025, which persists to this day, even during a war in which Riyadh and Abu Dhabi share a common adversary. This dispute has little to do with Israel, deriving instead from political and economic competition, personal tensions between two ambitious leaders, and differing approaches to regional conflicts involving separatist groups and the Muslim Brotherhood. But both countries are using narratives about Israel, antisemitism, and Iran to exert pressure on other regional actors to align with their camp and to win support in Washington. Israel's close partnership with the UAE, and their shared interest in developments the Saudis oppose, such as the secession of Somaliland from Somalia, may create an additional hurdle to getting the Saudis, or others who seek Riyadh's support, to advance on normalization.

### **But Opportunities Remain**

Although these countervailing factors present significant complications that will require delicate diplomatic work to manage, this moment also presents reasons for cautious optimism.

Leaders have emerged in Lebanon and Syria who have demonstrated their willingness to tackle difficult internal security problems and adopt a far more pragmatic approach toward Israel than their predecessors. Lebanese President Joseph Aoun and Prime Minister Nawaf Salam have expressed a steadfast commitment, with the United States' help, to set Lebanon on a path free of Hezbollah's decades-long grip on the Lebanese state. The framework agreement signed between Beirut and Jerusalem in late June is a promising step for which the administration and both parties deserve credit. President Aoun has stated that Lebanon seeks peaceful coexistence with Israel, and this objective should be celebrated and supported, even if it falls short of full normalization, while efforts proceed to implement the framework agreement that would disarm Hezbollah, fully deploy the Lebanese Armed Forces, and enable Israeli withdrawal.

The fall of the Assad regime has similarly created an opening for progress with Syria. President Trump's recent decision to remove Syria as a state sponsor of terrorism for the first time since 1979 is an important sign of the president's confidence in President Al-Sharaa's administration. The United States should adopt a "trust, but verify" approach to ensuring Syria lives up to its commitments. For both Beirut and Damascus, Israel's maintenance of buffer zones within Lebanese and Syrian territory is an affront to their national sovereignty. Although these security zones are a point of serious contention between Israel and its neighbors, they might also paradoxically serve as an incentive for steps toward normalization. Israel's peace agreements with Egypt and Jordan involved Israeli withdrawal from territory upon signing. For President Al-Sharaa, perpetually eager to demonstrate his government's credibility and sovereignty, the prospect of Israeli withdrawal is likely a motivating factor for continuing to seek security agreements with Israel that could benefit both countries.

Although the war with Iran further complicates regional integration, the repeated closure of the Strait of Hormuz since March leaves little room for doubt over the value of alternative energy routes and expanded infrastructure — a core pillar of IMEC and similar efforts. The conflict should also underscore to Saudi and other Gulf leaders the value of greater engagement with Israel, as further diplomatic engagement can unlock the kind of Israeli support which helped sustain the UAE's successful defense and high interception rate.

### **Recommendations for U.S. Policy**

With the remainder of my time, I offer the following recommendations to ensure that foundational, even if incremental, work toward regional integration continues in the near-term.

**First and foremost, work to bring the war with Iran to the earliest possible end, ensuring that the Strait of Hormuz remains open.** Talks on the Iranian nuclear program should be postponed, and sanctions on Tehran should be maintained. The Trump administration should also

renew its support for the Iranian people's brutally suppressed quest for freedom, especially as post-war conditions exacerbate preexisting pressures on Iran's currency, industry, and electric and water systems.

**Second, pursue active diplomacy to advance the president's twenty-point plan in Gaza, prioritizing Hamas' disarmament, but advancing other elements in parallel.** Although the Abraham Accords demonstrated a willingness of some states to act independently to advance regional integration, the post-October 7th reality will demand material progress for Palestinians to realize key integration objectives, especially those involving Saudi Arabia. Arab and Muslim states should be central to Gaza reconstruction and efforts to reform Palestinian leadership, and their participation should be complemented, with U.S. encouragement, by steps toward normalization with Israel. Indonesia, for example, the fourth-most populous country in the world and the most populous Muslim-majority nation, appeared on the verge of normalizing its relations with Israel on the eve of the October 7th attacks; while normalization is on hold, Jakarta has joined the president's Board of Peace and pledged to contribute troops to an International Stabilization Force. Speaking at the UN General Assembly last year, President Prabowo Subianto both called for an independent Palestinian state and underscored the need to recognize, respect, and ensure Israel's security. The prospect of normalizing relations with Israel remains unpopular with the Indonesian public, but contributing to the establishment of a future Palestinian state via the deployment of Indonesian troops to participate in the ISF in Gaza could help make normalization politically credible. Stalled progress on the twenty-point plan similarly stalls the normalization that can accompany its implementation.

**Third, insist on actions by Israel to lower tensions in the West Bank.** These should include active law enforcement to shut down Jewish terrorist activity, transferring tax and customs revenue to the Palestinian Authority, and reducing settlement expansion, and ending expressions of ambitions for annexation. The Palestinian Authority has its own reform responsibilities to fulfill, and we should continue to insist on them as well. But Israeli actions will have the most impact — positive or negative — on the atmosphere for regional integration.

**Fourth, resume normalization discussions with Saudi Arabia, beginning with a frank dialogue to understand what a new deal may look like given the monumental changes the region has experienced in the last three years.** Normalization between Israel and the Kingdom would be the single most transformative diplomatic breakthrough to reshape the region. Cooperation with Israel, and greater access to Israeli technology, would help advance Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman's ambitious Vision 2030 agenda, which has already narrowed significantly in the face of significant headwinds. American officials should engage with their Saudi counterparts to establish a clear set of conditions and a road map for normalization with Israel.

**Fifth, continue to invite other nations to affiliate with the Abraham Accords, and develop joint projects and additional incentives to continuously raise the opportunity cost of not participating.** Kazakhstan joining the Accords in November 2025 was easy to dismiss as symbolic, given longstanding diplomatic relations between Astana and Jerusalem, but the move helped demonstrate the Accords' continued vitality in a post-October 7th world.

**Sixth, resist the temptation to see the Abraham Accords as the exclusive brand or vehicle for regional integration.** While the Accords provide a useful construct to advance regional integration, other initiatives such as the Negev Forum, IMEC, and separate bilateral or minilateral groupings can all advance the broader goal. Regional integration should not even be considered limited to the Middle East and North Africa. Neighboring countries such as India, Ethiopia, Greece, Cyprus, and Central Asian states are all positioned to be partners in economic, infrastructure, energy, and security projects that can strengthen ties within and across regions. Indifference to integration efforts beyond the Abraham Accords could jeopardize the very progress that the Accords were designed to advance.

**Seventh, upgrade and bring increased urgency to efforts to get IMEC off the ground.** IMEC is the integration effort most immediately relevant to Gulf states' shifting security calculations in light of the Iran War. The work that the administration has already done to ensure the project remains on the agenda is important, and it should be intensified and receive greater focus from Cabinet-level officials to seize the opportunity that the Iran War presents.

**Eighth, push forward on deals between Israel and Lebanon, and Israel and Syria.** The U.S.-led negotiations between Jerusalem and Beirut that culminated in June's framework agreement represent a serious and productive diplomatic initiative to support a joint Israeli-Lebanese effort to disarm Hezbollah. The Lebanese government and Israel's shared objective of dismantling Hezbollah, if achieved, could usher in an unprecedented era of peace between the two neighbors. On Syria, U.S.-led negotiations between Jerusalem and Damascus on a security agreement showed promise in 2025, and should be resumed.

**Ninth, appoint and confirm a Special Envoy for the Abraham Accords, a position Congress created in the FY2024 NDAA.** This high-level appointment would underscore the administration's commitment to expanding the Accords and fostering regional integration and is essential to buttress the work being done by Special Envoy to the Middle East Steve Witkoff and Jared Kushner, who are spread too thin to provide the leadership this effort needs.

**Tenth, renew and upgrade the work of the Congressional Abraham Accords caucuses.** These caucuses' work is essential to draw on the expertise and jurisdictional focus of their diverse members and to convey the bipartisan commitment to expanding regional integration.

Especially as Iran's leaders have demonstrated their appetite to weaponize U.S. policy shifts in the region, emphasizing a bipartisan commitment to regional integration is critically important.

**Eleventh, work to foster dialogue between Israel and Gulf states on cooperation on regional stability.** As Washington seeks to shift our relationships in the region to emphasize partnership over dependency, working bilaterally with Israel and Gulf states and as a facilitator to bring the two sides together are both important avenues to bring about a post-war regional architecture that can stand on the merits of overlapping security interests, buttressed but not sustained by the United States. This should come in the form of both government efforts and complementary non-governmental initiatives to lay the groundwork for formal discussions. The Atlantic Council has been facilitating regional integration discussions since 2021, and our Program on Middle East Integration stands ready to assist with these efforts.

**Twelfth, ensure that the bilateral U.S.-Israel relationship remains strong enough to advance broad regional integration efforts that include a Palestinian state living peacefully alongside a secure Israel.** Regional integration serves the interests of all states who seek stability in the Middle East and prosperity for their citizens, and the U.S. plays an indispensable role in facilitating and encouraging these efforts. A severely degraded U.S.-Israel relationship would only diminish our ability to credibly lead on this issue, emboldening Iran, exacerbating Gulf anxieties, creating openings for our competitors, and dooming prospects for Israeli-Palestinian peace. Changes are coming to the U.S.-Israel relationship, as leaders of both countries have acknowledged. However, reflexively torpedoing the relationship would do significant harm to U.S. interests and influence in the Middle East.

The Abraham Accords were never envisioned as stand-alone achievements, nor was their signing in 2020 considered the completion of the regional integration project. Quite the contrary. The Accords were designed as a foundation and proof that Israel and Arab states could build mutually beneficial, functional, and public relationships. Six years later, and after nearly three years of the most severe stress test the region has faced in a generation, that foundation has held. The task before the administration and Congress today is to build on these achievements and ensure that the regional calculus continues to favor integration.

Thank you for your time and for the opportunity to testify today. I look forward to your questions.