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Normalization With Israel Has Been Ended by Its Brutal War on Gaza

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[Article Body:]

On December 14, 2023, the U.S. Congress passed the [National Defense Authorization Act](#), which included an interesting provision: for the U.S. President to create a special envoy for the Abraham Accords, the Negev Forum, and other related platforms. This addition came at the same time as the government worried deeply about the collapse of its entire agenda in the Middle East, as well as about the threats posed to Israel from Lebanon and Yemen. Until a few months ago, high officials of the United States preened about their political maneuvers to get the Arab states to normalize relations with Israel and to dilute the influence of China in the region. All these schemes collapsed in the ruins of Israel's

aggressive bombing campaign against the Palestinians in Gaza. Now, all of the structures created by the United States—starting with the Abraham Accords—appear to have lost their solidity. Whereas the question of Palestine had begun to drift off the radar of the Arab states, that question is now forced back to the center by the actions of Hamas and the other Palestinian armed factions on October 7.

The Abraham Accords

U.S. President Donald Trump was never interested in international law or the intricacies of diplomacy. As far as Israel was concerned, Trump was clear that he wanted to settle the conflict with the Palestinians—who seemed weakened by the Israeli policy of settlements and isolation of Gaza—to the benefit of Tel Aviv. In January 2020, Trump released his “Peace to Prosperity” [plan](#), which effectively disregarded the claims of the Palestinians and strengthened the apartheid Israeli state. The emblem of this hardened policy was that Trump was going to shift the U.S. embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, a provocative move that upended the Palestinian claim that the city was to be central to their state. “I have done a lot for Israel,” Trump [said](#) at a January 28 press conference that announced this plan, with Israel’s Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu beside him. “No Palestinians or Israelis will be uprooted from their homes,” Trump said, although his plan noted that “land swaps provided by the State of Israel could include both populated and unpopulated areas.” The contradiction did not matter. It was clear that Trump was going to back the annexation of the Occupied Palestine Territory come what may.

A few months later, Trump announced the [Abraham Accords](#), which were a set of bilateral deals between Israel and four countries (Bahrain, Morocco, Sudan, and the United Arab Emirates). These Accords promised to continue the process of normalization by Arab states, a process that started with [Egypt](#) in 1978 and then [Jordan](#) in 1994. In January 2023, the administration of U.S. President Joe Biden took this momentum forward by establishing the [Negev Forum Working Group](#) that brought together these states (Bahrain, Egypt, Morocco, and the United Arab Emirates) with Israel into a platform to “build bridges” in the region. In fact, this Forum was part of the overall project of driving a process for Arab states to have a public relationship with Israel. What eluded Israel and the United States was Saudi Arabia, which is a highly influential country in the region. If the Saudis joined this process, and if the Qataris came along, then the Palestinian cause would be significantly diminished.

The Indian Road

In July 2022, Biden went to Jerusalem to sit beside Israeli Prime Minister Yair Lapid to host a virtual [meeting](#) with India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the UAE's President Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan. At this meeting, the four men announced the creation of "i2u2," or a [platform](#) of commercial projects to be jointly developed by India, Israel, the United Arab Emirates, and the United States. This platform brought India directly into the plans for the normalization of relations between Israel and the Arab states.

The next year, at the sidelines of the G20 meeting in Delhi, several heads of government announced the creation of the [India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor](#) (IMEC). This corridor had the stated intention of contesting the Chinese-led Belt and Road Initiative as well as being an instrument to bring Saudi Arabia into the drive of normalization with Israel. The IMEC was to start in Gujarat and end in Greece, with a route that would take it through Saudi Arabia and Israel. Since both Saudi Arabia and Israel would be part of this corridor, it would mean the de facto recognition of Israel by Saudi Arabia. Israeli diplomatic officials began to [travel](#) to Saudi Arabia, suggesting that normalization was on the cards (with Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman [telling](#) Fox News in September 2023 that normalization was getting "closer").

The war on Gaza [stalled](#) the entire process. Mohammed Bin Salman held a phone call with Biden in late October, during which he said that the U.S. must call for a ceasefire, which was unlikely. As part of the call, Saudi officials [said](#) that the Crown Prince had noted the possibility of restarting the normalization dialogue after the war. But there was little enthusiasm in their voices. A few days after this call, Biden [said](#), "I'm convinced one of the reasons Hamas attacked when they did, and I have no proof of this, just my instinct tells me, is because of the progress we were making towards regional integration for Israel." The next day, the White House [said](#) that Biden had been misunderstood.

Ansar Allah and Hezbollah

Days after Israel began to mercilessly pummel Gaza, two new battlefronts opened. In southern Lebanon, Hezbollah fighters began to fire rockets into Israel, occasioning the [evacuation](#) of 80,000 Israelis. Israel struck back, including through the use of [illegal](#) white phosphorus. In early November, Hezbollah's leader Hassan Nasrallah [told](#) his followers that their fighters had new weapons with which to threaten not only Israel but also its enablers, the United States. U.S. warships sitting in the eastern Mediterranean, Nasrallah said, "do not scare us, and will not scare us." His fighters, he said, "have prepared for the fleets with which you threaten us." The presence of Russian-made Yakhont missiles

certainly gives Hezbollah the credibility to say that it can strike a U.S. warship that sits less than 300 kilometers from the Levantine coastline.

In the speech, Nasrallah congratulated Ansar Allah—also called the Houthis—for the missiles they fired toward Israel and toward ships trying to get to the Suez Canal. Those attacks by Ansar Allah have now stayed the hand of many shipping companies, who simply do not want to get into this conflict (Hong Kong’s OOCL, for instance, has [decided](#) that its ships will avoid the region and will not supply Israel). In retaliation, the U.S. has announced a maritime coalition to patrol the Red Sea. Ansar Allah [responded](#) that it would turn the waters into a “graveyard” because this coalition was not about maritime freedom but about allowing for the “[immoral](#)” resupplying of Israel.

The actions of Hezbollah and Ansar Allah have sent a message to the Arab capitals that at least some political forces are willing to offer material solidarity with the Palestinians. This will inspire the Arab populations to put more pressure on their governments. Normalization with Israel seems to be off the table. But, if this pressure mounts, countries like Egypt and Jordan might be forced to reconsider their peace treaties.