

How a Bet on Business Over Borders Rewired the Middle East

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1. Reading Passage

On September 15, 2020, leaders from Israel, the United Arab Emirates, and Bahrain signed a set of agreements at the White House that quietly rewrote one of the most rigid rules of Middle East diplomacy. The deals, brokered by the United States and named after the prophet Abraham — a shared ancestor in Judaism and Islam — established full diplomatic relations between Israel and two Arab states. Within months, Morocco joined; in January 2021, Sudan signed onto the declaration, though internal political instability stalled its full normalization. In November 2025, Kazakhstan became the latest country to accede.

For decades, the Arab consensus had been clear: no formal recognition of Israel until a Palestinian state existed. The Abraham Accords set that sequencing aside. Supporters call this their boldest feature; critics call it their deepest flaw. Either way, it marked a sharp break with the older 'land-for-peace' model that had defined regional diplomacy since the 1990s Oslo peace process advanced and then collapsed.

Why did the shift happen? Two forces converged. First, several Gulf states and Israel found themselves sharing strategic concerns — chief among them the regional reach of Iran — and had quietly maintained informal contacts for years. Second, the diplomatic philosophy behind the accords was that geoeconomics could ease geopolitics: tangible benefits like trade, investment, tourism, and access to advanced technology could make cooperation more attractive than continued estrangement. The Trump administration championed this approach as a way to reshape the region while sidestepping, rather than first solving, the Israeli–Palestinian dispute.

In practice, the changes were concrete. Ambassadors were exchanged, embassies opened, and direct commercial flights began connecting Tel Aviv with Gulf capitals. Tourism, banking, and technology partnerships followed. Behind the scenes, intelligence-sharing and defense coordination among the United States, Israel, and Gulf partners deepened — reinforcing Washington's role as the region's principal security guarantor and offering partners an alternative to leaning more heavily on other major powers.

But here's the catch. Critics argue the accords delivered the most for political and commercial elites while leaving ordinary populations — and the Palestinians in particular — on the sidelines. By normalizing relations without securing Palestinian statehood, opponents say, the agreements weakened a key source of Arab leverage. That tension came under strain after the 2023–2024 escalation in Gaza, when public opinion across many Arab countries turned sharply against normalization and people-to-people contacts cooled. Analysts have described the period that followed as a kind of 'suspended animation': the agreements stayed formally intact, but much of their warmth retreated to state-to-state and business-to-business channels.

Still, no signatory has formally withdrawn or severed ties with Israel. The framework's resilience was tested again during the spring 2026 conflict involving Iran, through which the core arrangements held and security cooperation among partners deepened. Following Kazakhstan's accession, U.S. officials publicly pressed a wider group — including Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Egypt, Turkey, Pakistan, and Jordan — to consider joining. Whether that push produces new signatories,

and whether elite-level agreements can translate into durable popular acceptance, remains the central open question of the project's next chapter.

2. Explanation

In 2020, a handful of Arab states did something they'd refused to do for decades: recognize Israel without waiting for a Palestinian state first. The Middle East hasn't looked the same since.

What's Going On?

The Abraham Accords are a set of U.S.-brokered agreements, first signed on September 15, 2020, that established formal diplomatic relations between Israel and several Muslim-majority countries. The original signatories were the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain, with Morocco joining that December and Sudan signing the declaration in January 2021.

The big deal isn't just that these countries shook hands — it's that they did so without first demanding the creation of a Palestinian state, breaking a decades-old Arab diplomatic rule. In November 2025, Kazakhstan became the latest country to join, and Saudi Arabia and Syria have signaled interest but haven't signed.

How To Think About It

The core gamble of the accords was that money and security could solve what ideology couldn't. Two parallels help:

- Think of post-WWII Europe: France and Germany had fought three brutal wars in 75 years. Their fix wasn't to keep negotiating borders — it was to fuse their coal and steel industries so war became economically unthinkable. The accords use the same logic: tangle the economies, and the politics follow.
- Or think of rival high schools that hated each other for generations — until they had to collaborate on a robotics competition with serious prize money. The old grudge doesn't vanish, but suddenly there's a reason to be in the same room. Iran played the role of the 'common rival' here.

Key Things To Know

- The accords aren't one treaty — they're a general declaration plus separate bilateral deals (embassies, flights, trade, defense) between Israel and each country.
- The name comes from the prophet Abraham, a shared ancestor in Judaism and Islam — branding meant to emphasize common heritage.
- A shared worry about Iran's regional power quietly pushed Israel and several Gulf states toward cooperation years before the signing.
- The 2023–2024 Gaza war chilled the accords' public side: Arab public opinion turned hostile, but no government has formally withdrawn.
- Most people assume the accords 'solved' the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. They did the opposite — they set it aside, which is exactly why critics call them fragile.

Why It Matters

If you follow international news, almost every Middle East story now runs through this framework: Saudi-Israel talks, Iran tensions, Gaza diplomacy, even oil markets. Understanding the accords gives you

the underlying map. And if you're considering studying international relations, business, or energy – these agreements are reshaping where investment flows, where tech companies set up offices, and which alliances will define the 2030s.

The Bigger Picture

The accords survived their biggest stress test – the spring 2026 Iran conflict – without anyone walking out, which suggests the framework is more durable than skeptics predicted. The next question is whether the U.S. can pull in heavyweights like Saudi Arabia, Qatar, or Pakistan, and whether elite-level handshakes can ever win over publics that remain deeply skeptical. Watch for two things: any Saudi move, and whether a future Palestinian settlement gets bolted onto the framework.

3. Key Terms Glossary

Normalization

The formal establishment of full diplomatic relations between two countries – exchanging ambassadors, opening embassies, and allowing trade, travel, and other state-to-state activity.

Bilateral agreement

A deal between exactly two countries, as opposed to a multilateral treaty involving many parties at once.

Geoeconomics

The use of economic tools – trade deals, investment, sanctions – to achieve geopolitical goals that might otherwise require military or diplomatic pressure.

Land-for-peace

The older Middle East diplomatic model in which Israel would return territory captured in past wars in exchange for Arab recognition and peace agreements.

Oslo peace process

1990s negotiations between Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization that produced interim agreements but ultimately failed to deliver a final Palestinian state.

Security guarantor

A powerful country (here, the U.S.) that commits to defending or backing partners in a region, anchoring the local balance of power.

Accession

The formal act of a new country joining an existing international agreement that others have already signed.

Suspended animation

Used metaphorically here: a state where something is technically alive and functioning but largely dormant, with most visible activity paused.

4. Reading Comprehension Quiz

Circle the best answer for each question.

Q1. The passage primarily argues that the Abraham Accords represent which of the following?

- A) A comprehensive resolution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict negotiated in 2020
- B) A strategic bet that economic ties could ease political conflicts in the Middle East
- C) A failed diplomatic experiment that collapsed after the 2023-2024 Gaza war
- D) A military alliance designed to confront Iran across the entire Arab world

Q2. According to the passage, the accords broke with prior Arab diplomatic practice mainly because they

- A) required Israel to withdraw from territory before recognition was granted
- B) established relations without first requiring a Palestinian state to exist
- C) involved the United States as the primary broker of the negotiations
- D) focused on cultural exchange rather than on economic cooperation

Q3. Which choice best states the central idea of the passage?

- A) Arab public opinion has consistently supported normalization with Israel since 2020.
- B) The accords reordered Middle East diplomacy by prioritizing economic ties over older conditions.
- C) The Trump administration's main foreign policy goal was solving the Palestinian question.
- D) Iran's regional power has been completely contained by the signatory states' cooperation.

Q4. As used in the passage, the word "warmth" most nearly means

- A) physical heat generated by activity
- B) active friendliness and public engagement
- C) emotional sympathy for a person
- D) moderate temperature of an environment

Q5. As used in the passage, the word "resilience" most nearly means

- A) physical flexibility of a material
- B) ability to withstand stress without breaking
- C) speed of recovery after an injury
- D) willingness to compromise on principles

Q6. Which statement about the accords can most reasonably be inferred from the passage?

- A) The accords are likely to be formally dissolved within the next decade.
- B) Public sentiment in signatory countries lags behind their governments' official positions.
- C) Saudi Arabia signed the accords shortly after Kazakhstan in late 2025.
- D) Sudan has become a leading economic partner of Israel since 2021.

Q7. The passage suggests that the most significant risk to the accords' long-term success is

- A) the gap between elite agreements and broader popular acceptance
- B) the unwillingness of the United States to remain involved as broker
- C) the immediate threat of formal withdrawal by current signatories
- D) the complete absence of any economic benefit to participating countries

Q8. The author's tone in describing the accords' future is best characterized as

- A)** openly skeptical of any further expansion
- B)** enthusiastically optimistic about complete regional peace
- C)** measured and analytical, weighing both durability and limits
- D)** alarmed about an imminent collapse of the framework

Q9. Based on the passage, which factor most directly contributed to the original signing of the accords in 2020?

- A)** A formal United Nations resolution requiring Arab recognition of Israel
- B)** Shared strategic concern about Iran's regional reach among Israel and Gulf states
- C)** A dramatic shift in Israeli policy toward Palestinian statehood
- D)** The complete economic collapse of every Arab signatory state

Q10. Which choice provides the best evidence for the answer to the previous question?

- A)** "The Abraham Accords are not a single treaty but a framework..."
- B)** "Several Gulf states and Israel found themselves sharing strategic concerns – chief among them the regional reach of Iran..."
- C)** "Direct commercial flights began connecting Tel Aviv with Gulf capitals..."
- D)** "No signatory has formally withdrawn from the accords or severed ties with Israel."

My Score: _____ / 10

5. Answer Key with Explanations

Q1. The passage primarily argues that the Abraham Accords represent which of the following?

Answer: B

The passage repeatedly frames the accords as a wager that economic and security incentives could defuse political tension. C is the strongest distractor (Trap A – right scope, wrong direction): the passage explicitly says no signatory withdrew, so 'failed' misreads it. SAT Tip: When a question asks for the 'primary' argument, pick the option that captures the passage's overall thesis – not a true detail mentioned only in passing.

Q2. According to the passage, the accords broke with prior Arab diplomatic practice mainly because they

Answer: B

The passage states that the long-standing Arab consensus had conditioned recognition of Israel on a prior Palestinian state, and the accords set that sequencing aside. D is the strongest distractor (Trap B – passage vocabulary recombined wrongly): the accords actually emphasized economics, not cultural exchange. SAT Tip: When a question says 'according to the passage,' your answer must be directly supported by text – even a plausible real-world fact is wrong if the passage doesn't say it.

Q3. Which choice best states the central idea of the passage?

Answer: B

B captures the through-line: the accords reframed regional diplomacy around shared interests rather than prior conditions. D is the strongest distractor (Trap C – true-sounding but unsupported): the passage notes shared concern about Iran but never claims Iran has been 'completely contained.' SAT Tip: Watch out for absolute words like 'completely,' 'always,' or 'never' in answer choices – they're often planted in distractors.

Q4. As used in the passage, the word "warmth" most nearly means

Answer: B

In context, 'warmth retreated to state-to-state and business-to-business channels' describes how public, people-to-people friendliness cooled. A and D are the common literal meanings (Trap B – common definition rather than passage meaning). SAT Tip: On vocabulary-in-context, substitute each option into the sentence – only the right answer keeps the sentence's original meaning intact.

Q5. As used in the passage, the word "resilience" most nearly means

Answer: B

The passage uses 'resilience' to describe the accords surviving the 2026 Iran conflict intact, meaning they held up under pressure. A is the literal/physical meaning (Trap B). SAT Tip: Vocabulary-in-context answers are usually the second or third meaning of a word, not the first one you'd think of – the SAT rarely tests the most common definition.

Q6. Which statement about the accords can most reasonably be inferred from the passage?

Answer: B

The passage describes a gap between formally intact agreements and Arab public opinion turning against normalization – clearly implying public sentiment trails official policy. C is the strongest distractor (Trap B – passage names both countries but the passage explicitly says Saudi Arabia has not signed). SAT Tip: Inference questions reward modest claims supported by text, not bold predictions about the future.

Q7. The passage suggests that the most significant risk to the accords' long-term success is

Answer: A

The passage closes by naming popular acceptance as 'the central open question' of the project's next chapter. C is the strongest distractor (Trap A – opposite direction): the passage explicitly states no signatory has withdrawn. SAT Tip: The final paragraph of a passage often signals what the author considers most important – read it carefully when answering 'big picture' questions.

Q8. The author's tone in describing the accords' future is best characterized as

Answer: C

The author notes the framework's resilience but also flags real tensions like Gaza fallout and public opposition – a balanced posture. B is the strongest distractor (Trap A – wrong direction/intensity): the passage is far from cheerleading. SAT Tip: For tone questions, look at the author's adjectives and qualifiers – words like 'tested,' 'remains,' and 'whether' signal measured analysis, not strong emotion.

Q9. Based on the passage, which factor most directly contributed to the original signing of the accords in 2020?

Answer: B

The passage names Iran's regional reach as a chief shared concern that drove Israel and Gulf states toward quiet cooperation, which became public via the accords. C is the strongest distractor (Trap C – sounds reasonable but unsupported): the passage says the opposite – the accords set Palestinian statehood aside. SAT Tip: When asked about causes, look for explicit causal language in the passage ('grew out of,' 'because,' 'chief among them') rather than guessing what feels logical.

Q10. Which choice provides the best evidence for the answer to the previous question?

Answer: B

B explicitly names the Iran concern as a shared driver – directly supporting the previous answer. A, C, and D describe the structure, results, or durability of the accords, not their cause. SAT Tip: On evidence-pairing questions, first identify the exact line in the passage that supports your previous answer, then match it to the option that contains the same idea – don't pick based on which excerpt sounds important on its own.