



2022-01(S)

Deepening UAE-Israel Strategic Cooperation after the Abraham Accords

Jang Ji-Hyang

Senior Fellow
The Asan Institute for Policy Studies
2022.01.17

The Abraham Accords and Normalization of Arab-Israel Relations

In September 2020, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Bahrain, and Israel signed the Abraham Accords at the White House to normalize relations. The Abraham Accords take their name from Abraham, the common religious ancestor found in Christianity, Judaism, and Islam, and signifies mutual understanding and coexistence between different civilizations. Later, Sudan and Morocco also agreed to establish diplomatic ties with Israel. Given its status as the protector of Islam's holiest sites, Saudi Arabia chose to support the process from behind the scenes. The Accords have constituted the basis for deeper strategic cooperation between the UAE and Israel, in particular, in the face of the United States' withdrawal from the Middle East and Iran's regional expansionism. With the Biden administration seeking to rejoin the Iran nuclear deal at a time when Iranian hardliners are trying to resume nuclear enrichment activities, the UAE and Israel have sought to strengthen their mutual defense ties.

In October 2020, Israeli Intelligence Director Yossi Cohen visited the UAE and Bahrain to discuss intelligence cooperation. In Israel, the issue of the Abraham Accords and the establishment of diplomatic ties with Arab countries was entirely handled by the intelligence agency, not the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The UAE, Bahrain, and Israel pledged to establish embassies, open direct flights, and strengthen economic and information technology cooperation. In particular, the cooperation fields between the UAE and Israel were much more specific and wide-ranging, such as tourism, medical care, high-tech industries and startup enterprises, energy, information security, and telecommunications.

After the signing of the Abraham Accords, Israel was able to more accurately collect information about Iran's military training activities in the Persian Gulf, which was acquired by the UAE. In addition, Israel's intelligence agency, Mossad, quickly identified threats to the UAE and, thanks to Mossad's intelligence, the UAE's overseas missions were able to

avoid attacks. In April 2021, the UAE, Israel, Greece, and Cyprus conducted a joint military exercise, and in November, the UAE, Bahrain, Israel, and the U.S. Naval Central Command conducted a multilateral maritime exercise in the Red Sea. Meanwhile, the establishment of diplomatic ties between Sudan and Israel was less about ending hostilities and pursuing peace than the result of negotiations with the United States, as Sudan had demanded the U.S. remove it from State Department's list of state sponsors of terrorism. Despite these differences, the agreements to normalize relations by the UAE, Bahrain, Sudan, and Morocco with Israel are collectively called the Abraham Accords.

Deepening UAE-Israel Cooperation in the Face of Changes in Iran and the United States

After the Abraham Accords, the UAE and Israel have especially strengthened their strategic cooperation across intelligence sharing and joint military exercises in preparation for Iran's pursuit of expansionism and the U.S. withdrawal from the Middle East. In the process of deepening cooperation with Israel, the UAE has less internal and external restrictions than Saudi Arabia and Bahrain, and it is the first among the six Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries to reform its military, foreign and defense policy, economy, and society at an unparalleled pace.

The UAE's de facto leader and Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi, Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan (MbZ), has actively worked since the mid-2000s to transform and improve the country in terms of military security, transparent diplomacy, industrial diversification, and social liberalization. In 2011, when Libyan dictator Muammar al-Qaddafi launched a bloody crackdown on pro-democracy protesters, the UAE actively participated in NATO's 'Operation Odyssey Dawn' to punish Gaddafi, earning it the nickname 'Little Sparta' and 'America's Right Hand' by U.S. military officials.

At a time when Iran's hardliners revealed their intention to resume nuclear development and enrichment activities, the Biden administration has rushed to rejoin the Iran nuclear deal, and the UAE and Israel emphasized the establishment of a Middle East version of NATO. Because of opposition from Arab countries, Israel had been part of the United States military's European Command (EUCOM), but recently, with the UAE's initiative, discussions about Israel's incorporation into U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM) have begun to gain momentum. When the Biden administration hesitated to sell its F-35 fighter jets to the UAE, Israel, as the only country in the Middle East to have the jets, sought to convince the United States to proceed with the sale.

In addition, the Abraham Accords were desperately needed not only for Iran's expansionism, but also for strengthening the longevity of the UAE regime in the face of declining revenues due to low oil prices and a change in the attitudes of young people. This is because the UAE has been implementing radical reform policies in the economic and social sectors since the mid-2010s, and regional stability is essential for these policies to bear fruit. Israel's technological competitiveness is of great help to the UAE's reform policy that focuses on fostering high-tech industries and startups as well as creating jobs for the youth and women.

One Year after the Abraham Accords: Assessment and Prospects

The Abraham Accords are regarded as a new security cooperation mechanism that breaks away from the outdated Arab nationalism of the past which was tired of the long-term Israeli-Palestinian armed conflict and the incompetence and corruption of the Palestinian political organizations, Fatah and Hamas. Arab states have been silent on the authoritarian actions of Fatah and Hamas and their oppression of civil society, supporting the Palestinians, the same people, in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The Palestinian Authority, Iran, and Turkey strongly criticized the Abraham Accords, but opposition within the Arab world was not that strong. The Biden administration not surprisingly supports the UAE-Israel strategic cooperation and Arab-Israeli détente. Although the Abraham Accords are the legacy of the Trump administration, it is good news that U.S. allies have formed solidarity beyond fiercely narrow nationalism as the U.S. prepares to reduce its role in the Middle East.

As Egypt's sense of alienation grew within the pro-U.S. Sunni Arab Quartet comprising Saudi Arabia, UAE, Bahrain, and Egypt due to the Abraham Accords, the possibility of cracks was raised. In May 2021, when armed clashes between Israel and Hamas broke out, Egypt re-emerged by mediating a ceasefire and received thanks from President Biden. Unlike Egypt, the UAE does not have the resources to start a dialogue channel with Hamas, and the feud of the Arab Quartet was settled.

Concerns were also raised that the security cooperation between the Sunni Gulf countries and Israel could stimulate the Iranian hardliners and cause regional instability. However, given that public opinion in the UAE and Saudi Arabia is in favor of pragmatism rather than nationalism and sectarianism and at a time when the UAE and Saudi Arabia are actively pursuing economic reform policies, these countries will avoid an unnecessary confrontation with Iran.

Meanwhile, the countries mentioned as candidates for additional accession to the Abraham Accords will decide their future course after further monitoring the details of the U.S. policy of “leaving the Middle East”, the degree of UAE-Israel amity, and the speed at which Saudi-Iran relations are recovering. Although other Arab countries will not quickly join the ranks of the Abraham Accords, which have opened an era of Arab-Israeli détente, the Accords have contributed greatly to regional stability and deepening cooperation.

In addition, the strategic solidarity between the UAE and Israel, which has been deepened since the Abraham Accords, will be further strengthened in the future. In light of the UAE’s recent reconciliation with Iran and its position on improving relations, it will be difficult for the UAE-Israel relationship to develop to the level of a formal alliance, but the level of substantive cooperation will be further strengthened.

This article is an English Summary of Asan Issue Brief (2021-34).

(‘아브라함 협정 이후 UAE-이스라엘 전략적 협력의 심화’, <http://www.asaninst.org/?p=81729>)



Jang Ji-Hyang

Center for Regional Studies

Dr. JANG Ji-Hyang is a senior fellow and director of the Center for Middle East and North Africa at the Asan Institute for Policy Studies. Dr. Jang served as a policy advisor on Middle East issues to South Korea’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs (2012-2018). Previously, Dr. Jang taught comparative and Middle East politics at Seoul National University, Yonsei University, Ewha Woman’s University, and the Hankuk University of Foreign Studies. Her research interests include political economy of the Middle East and North Africa, political Islam, comparative democratization, terrorism, and state-building. Dr. Jang is the author of numerous books and articles, including *The Arab Spring: Will It Lead to Democratic Transitions?* (with Clement M. Henry (eds.), Palgrave Macmillan 2013), “Disaggregated ISIS and the New Normal of Terrorism” (Asan Issue Brief 2016), “Islamic Fundamentalism” (International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences 2008), and a Korean translation of Fawaz Gerges’ *Journey of the Jihadist: Inside Muslim Militancy* (Asan Institute 2011). Dr. Jang received a B.A. in Turkish studies and M.A. in political science from the Hankuk University of Foreign Studies and her Ph.D. in political science from the University of Texas at Austin.