

The Abraham Accords

A Model for Scaling Soft Power Amid Global Conflagrations

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While the world appears engulfed in conflict, including two full-scale wars in Europe and the Middle East, and the looming possibility of a third in Asia, hard power through military action is understandably the central focus. The effects of hard power (military and economic action) are often seen right away, while the effects of soft power (political and diplomatic pressure) may be slower to bear fruit and more difficult to measure. Soft power should not be misconstrued as soft leadership and is not without risk, as tenacious advocacy and a relentless pursuit of a better path are coincident. Accordingly, soft power remains a potent tool of diplomatic statecraft, serving as a foundational pillar upon which to build dialogue between competing factions prior to (or parallel with) hard power alternatives.¹ To avoid these conflicts sparking a global conflagration, we must rapidly scale soft power and diplomacy.

Abraham Accords

Bilateral and multinational diplomacy, two elements of soft power, are vital to peacebuilding in regions of intense historical tension, such as the Middle East. The Abraham Accords peace agreements of 2020 (hereinafter the Accords) are a recent example of how the United States built, and subsequently used, political capital to attempt to lower long-standing tension in the region and to isolate Iran. The attacks of October 7, 2023, forever changed the trajectory of diplomacy in the region; however, we maintain that the Accords are a model for success. Commerce may provide the largest foundation for successive iterations, which we describe below.

The Accords, originally a treaty of peace between the United Arab Emirates and the State of Israel, wielded results immediately after the deal was verbally agreed to, even prior to its official signing. The treaty listed several spheres of mutual interest, including civil aviation. On August 31, 2020, El Al 971 became the first commercial flight from Tel Aviv in Israel to Dubai in the UAE. Just as significant as the flight itself was the route the plane took, flying over the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, which shortened the trip by several hours. Although the Kingdom was not formally involved in the peace talks with Israel and the UAE, and had no diplomatic ties to Israel, opening its airspace for this historic flight was a substantial offer of goodwill. Saudi airspace remains open to Israeli flights to this day.

Upon arriving in the UAE, the delegation, including the national security advisors from the United States, Israel, and the UAE, spent time on a cultural visit in Dubai, which resulted in Israel and the UAE recognizing each other's visas to ensure smooth travel between countries for their citizens. The image of an Israeli plane landing in the UAE captured the attention of millions, not only in the region but worldwide, making the peace agreement more tangible. Arabs, who had grown up in a world where diplomatic relations with Israel never seemed possible, were suddenly presented with the reality that they could travel to Al Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem for religious pilgrimages. Israelis, who never had the opportunity to travel to neighboring Arab countries, were now able to plan trips for business or holidays.

The Kingdom of Bahrain, which was not included in the original Accords, soon realized what the Accords could mean for the region and expressed interest in joining.² On September 15, 2020, both the Abraham Accords Peace Agreement: A Treaty of Peace, Diplomatic Relations and Full Normalization Between The United Arab Emirates and The State of Israel, and the Abraham Accords: Declaration of Peace, Cooperation, and Constructive Diplomatic Friendly Relations between the State of Israel and the Kingdom of Bahrain were signed at the White House. Shortly

after the official signing ceremony, Kosovo, Sudan, and Morocco signed on, joining Egypt and Jordan, which had recognized Israel's statehood through the Camp David Accords in 1978 and the Jordan-Israeli Peace Treaty in 1994, respectively.

Deep Promise as a Step Toward Peace

The cultural effects, or people-to-people relations, of the Accords are arguably the most important for lasting and generational peace. Abu Dhabi, an emirate that has been slower to adopt normalization with Israel, opened the Abrahamic Family House, home to a mosque, synagogue, and church, which "serves to bridge our common humanity through the exchange of knowledge, ongoing dialogue, and the practice of faith."³ Bahrain's small Jewish community, which dates back 140 years but numbered only about fifty members in 2020, never imagined they could make the pilgrimage to the Holy Land. While the Kingdom has practiced religious tolerance for quite some time, there was no public practice of Judaism until September 2020.⁴ In addition to Bahraini Jews making the pilgrimage, Muslims such as Mohammed Saleh, an official with Bahrain's Education Ministry, are now able to visit Jerusalem. Saleh was part of the first Bahraini delegation to travel to Israel on Gulf Air's direct flight from Manama to Tel Aviv. The delegation met with government and business leaders and visited a Holocaust memorial and other religious and historical sites. "The Bahrainis . . . experienced the welcoming, inquisitive, and charmingly intrusive Israel that pleasantly surprises so many first-time visitors," noted *The Times of Israel* reporter Lazar Berman.⁵ Citizens, or the "targets" of soft power, may be more open to pursuing peace with their enemies if they see them as human beings. Official peace treaties between nation-states are necessary to begin diplomatic relations, but they serve as a catalyst for peacebuilding. Exposure to new cultures and religions, careful listening, and relationship building among the citizens of these communities is where lasting change happens.⁶

Public opinion is a tangible measure of the success of soft power. For decades, Emirati public opinion of Israel was low, and they were generally uninterested in diplomatic relations with Israel. Between July 2020 and November 2020, after the Accords were signed, Emirati support for business and sports contacts with Israelis rose from less than 15 percent to almost 40 percent. From July 2020 to November 2022, those who "strongly disagreed" with having business and sports ties dropped from 47 percent to 21 percent. Also worth noting, Saudi support for business and sports ties with Israel rose from 9 percent in July 2020 to 37 percent in November 2020. While Saudi has not normalized relations with Israel, it is promising that the Kingdom has been tangentially involved in, and not actively opposed to, normalization.⁷

For centuries, the region has had to navigate deep religious, political, and ideological differences. It took the United Arab Emirates seventy-two years to recognize the State of Israel, so we do not yet know if the treaty will bear long-term success. In the summer of 2023, there was a very real possibility that Saudi Arabia might sign, but the trajectory of the Accords changed drastically on October 7. While tourism has slowed and diplomatic relations may have cooled, the Accords remain intact with all original signatories, which hints at the strength of the threads soft power weaves together. It is worth noting that after October 7, most international carriers canceled flights to and from Tel Aviv, but UAE carriers Etihad and FlyDubai were more lenient with their flight schedules. Citizens of Accords countries must continue to receive the resources needed to ensure generational success.

Applications in Other Regions

Although detractors remain, and, in some cases, the successes of soft power are not uniform (Bosnia-Herzegovina) or yet tangible (Europe's efforts with Iran or Afghanistan), other historic efforts provide a beacon of hope and show

why scaling diplomacy now is imperative.⁸ For example, the Good Friday Agreement halted The Troubles that plagued Northern Ireland for decades. The subsequent trade, cultural, and economic benefits have lasted more than twenty-five years.⁹ Although the Accords are young relative to the Good Friday Agreement, both show that soft power is region and issue agnostic, which is compelling given the current conflicts in Europe, the Middle East, and Asia.

Accordingly, the hopes of replicating a similar approach between China and Taiwan, North Korea and South Korea, Israel and Gaza, and Ukraine and Russia are not new nor are they novel. However, the Abraham Accords renewed a sense of opportunity for those endeavoring a solution to manifold global discord. Additionally, when soft power was conceived, our modern multifaceted connectivity was yet to be realized, so there remain opportunities to leverage new soft power facets to our benefit. For example, the speed and interconnectivity of currency, global markets, and the internet of things, undergirded by a daily evolving social media landscape, provide limitless opportunities, no matter how small or seemingly inconsequential. Of course, bad actors will seek to undermine this effort, but that is where the international community takes on a primary role, protecting the seeds of soft power and providing them an opportunity to grow (hopefully as rapidly as possible).

Conclusion

Soft power is not, and does not provide, a cure-all mechanism for all that ails diplomatic progress. However, when a conflict arises, especially with a threat or possibility of hard power, it becomes increasingly difficult to identify pressure relief valves that deescalate the situation, let alone provide an optimistic path to peace. Soft power's versatility provides its viability; it can be tailored to meet the moment and the people for which it is intended, incorporating the variables most conducive to progress and dialogue and relieving (or sidestepping altogether) that hard power pressure. Therefore, with the real possibility of global conflagration looming, we must scale soft power dramatically.

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2 Jared Kushner, *Breaking History: A White House Memoir* (Broadside Books, 2022).

3 Abraham Accords Peace Institute Annual Report 2023, April 1, 2024.

4 Josefin Dolsten, "Jews Have Lived in Bahrain for 140 years. The Country's Peace Deal with Israel Changes Their Lives," *Jewish Telegraphic Agency*, September 15, 2020, <https://www.jta.org/2020/09/15/global/jews-have-lived-in-bahrain-for-140-years-the-countrys-peace-deal-with-israel-changes-their-lives>.

5 Lazar Berman, "From Western Wall to Old City Alleys, Curious Israelis Embrace Bahraini Visitors," *The Times of Israel*, October 9, 2021, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/from-western-wall-to-old-city-alleys-curious-israelis-embrace-bahraini-visitors/>.

6 Alistair Campbell and Rory Stewart, *The Rest Is Politics*, "103. Archbishop of Canterbury: Faith, Mental Health, and the Future of the Church," produced and presented by Dom Johnson and Tom Whiter, October 20, 2024, podcast, 1 hr., 23 min., 54 sec.

<https://therestispolitics.supportingcast.fm/listen/leading/103-archbishop-of-canterbury-faith-mental-health-and-the-future-of-the-church>.

7 Dylan Kassin and David Pollock, "Arab Public Opinion on Arab-Israeli Normalization and Abraham Accords," The Washington Institute, July 15, 2022, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/arab-public-opinion-arab-israeli-normalization-and-abraham-accords>.

8 Judy Dempsey, "The Failure of Soft Power," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, September 28, 2011.

9 University of Notre Dame, "Northern Ireland Good Friday Agreement," Peace Accords Matrix, accessed September 4, 2024.