

Building Media Cooperation Between Abraham Accords Countries

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Brief Analysis

For the Abraham Accords to be truly successful, cooperation between member countries must necessarily extend to partnerships of more accurate and far-reaching media sources.

As a result of the Abraham Accords (AA), now in their third year, diplomatic relations between the Gulf nations and Israel are at an all-time high. These relationships have led to bilateral cooperation in a number of key sectors, but also represent a chance to identify areas (<https://www.israelhayom.com/opinions/the-importance-of-media-alliance-among-abraham-accords-states/>) where more attention is needed—media coordination.

When it comes to AA countries, all involved must manage and counter disinformation, bias, and polarization in overseas media coverage of their countries, while also reflecting on ways to foster mutual understanding between the AA countries themselves. In Gulf countries, media presentation overwhelmingly focuses on human rights violations at the expense of other aspects of the Gulf, while coverage of Israel often presents an unnuanced portrayal of the country as a violent occupier. Likewise, coverage of the Abraham Accords itself has often been muted, while downplaying cooperation between Arab Gulf countries. To help contribute to these conversations, countries involved in the Abraham Accords should establish avenues of media cooperation, helping to share real and accurate stories and nuanced coverage of both successes and challenges.

The Impact of Bias and Polarization

At present, the region can be understood as divided into two axes.

(<https://www.gatestoneinstitute.org/11471/axis-moderation-resistance>) The ‘Axis of Moderation’ is characterized by a more pragmatic, moderate approach to the region—the UAE, Bahrain, Egypt, Jordan, Morocco and Saudi Arabia—compared to the ideologically driven approach of Iran, Shia groups loyal to the concept of Khomeini’s *wilayat al-Faqih*, and Sunni Islamist groups such as Hamas and the Muslim Brotherhood.

One of the most fundamental differences between the two axes is their approach to statehood. Axis of Moderation countries are pro-statehood and work with other states. In contrast, the model of the 'Axis of Resistance' is focused on a revolutionary ideology that supports non-state actors—an especially destabilizing force in Lebanon, Yemen, and Iraq.

Some western political parties and media outlets, especially those to the left, have seen political Islamists such as the Muslim Brotherhood and the Iranian regime as convenient antidotes to those extremist groups that have become the most feared outside of the region, like Da'esh and al-Qaeda. The former have presented themselves as versions of moderate Islam that can tame the latter terrorist groups. On the other hand, the alternative understanding—that political Islamists like the Muslim Brotherhood are a gateway by developing an ideology that can lead into the ideology of extremism—aligns with the understanding of the Axis of Moderation's perception, and shapes the latter's approach to these groups. Such conflicting narratives have led to media representations of both Israel and the Gulf that fail to reflect their own motivations and concerns, while in some cases amplifying narratives that stem from the Axis of Resistance.

One **case in point** (<https://www.sharnoffsglobalviews.com/arab-gulf-palestinian/>) is the regional approach to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Axis of Moderation states support a two-state solution based on the 2002 Arab Peace Initiative. Meanwhile, the Axis of Resistance looks to expel Israel using armed militias, and is focused on destabilization in a way that could eventually become a national security threat to the region. Palestinian leadership also leans into this ideological approach, especially through the rhetoric of Hamas but also through the Arab nationalist, leftist, and communist rhetoric referenced by Fatah. This approach has had negative practical ramifications, with Palestinian leadership rejecting certain pragmatic efforts towards peace over the years.

This leaves the more pragmatically-oriented state of Israel in control of the balance of power, which from an **international relations** (<https://www.britannica.com/topic/balance-of-power>) perspective means that they are in a stronger position to protect themselves. Moreover, due to the Palestinian pursuit of an ideological path as well as the material and the territorial indicators being **heavily in Israel's favor (blank)**, this puts Israel in control of most of the dispute—and therefore less motivated to change the status quo.

Consequently, a joint media venture can help try to foster greater understanding between populations in AA countries, while shifting the younger generation of Palestinians away from narratives supportive of the Axis of Resistance and providing more nuance to these issues to outside media sources. A joint media, with a satellite news channel, social media, apps, and citizen diplomacy can allow citizens from Abraham Accords countries to call out and address the polarization and bias.

To address the damaging narratives of Islamist groups, a more informal channel such as YouTube that can highlight the radical narratives of these groups in Arabic to non-Arabic speakers is perhaps most appropriate. As such, translating these Arabic messages can help educate the Western public on the true nature of political Islamist groups while helping clarify Arab states' attitudes towards them.

Coordinating Media Cooperation During Conflict

Instances of more coordinated media cooperation likewise already exist, and their examples can be built upon. On April 7, 2021, Emirates News Agency and Tazpit Press Service signed a professional news exchange and cooperation agreement. Emirates News Agency has also launched a **Hebrew-language website** (<https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2021/04/emirati-israeli-media-outlets-sign-cooperation-agreement>). However, the two agencies now need a clear policy on how to cooperate not only in times of stability, but to focus on exchanging print, audio, and video content in times of turmoil—especially during periods of conflict between Israelis and Palestinians.

Silence during this period, as was the case during the 2021 conflict sparked by Sheikh Jarrah, would allow radical

and terrorist organizations to take advantage of the hostility to promote their ideologies. Scenes from these conflicts have a significant impact on the Arab public, including those from Abraham Accords signatory countries. Some members of the public in the UAE and Bahrain were deeply affected by the media scenes they saw from Gaza during the conflict in May 2021, with these scenes impacting their views of Israel.

As such, it is important to encourage the exchange between political analysts and journalists from Abraham Accords countries, including Israel, so that they appear in each other's media and help to provide context and inclusive views during times of turmoil. To this end, scenes from both sides of the conflict need to be shown throughout Arab, Israeli, and outside media. Israeli strikes that caused death, injury, and the destruction of buildings in Gaza should be depicted, and Hamas projectile missiles launched at Israel must also be shown.

The author met (via Zoom) with Professor Mordechai Kedar, an Israeli scholar of Arabic culture and a lecturer at Bar-Ilan University in Tel Aviv, to discuss the matter of a media alliance and joint media ventures among Abraham Accords countries. Professor Kedar was supportive of the idea and noted that the kernel of such an institution already exists in Israel, though it needs to be developed further. A mobile app Kedar has designed, called Israel & Middle East News, provides a wide range of national news, sports, technology, and entertainment coverage and is intended to feature both accurate news and articles that combat misinformation. Kedar expressed interest in engaging with Emirati counterparts, and in the discussion, numerous ideas for further development emerged.

The application is currently in Hebrew and English, with plans to add Arabic and other languages. And while the application currently covers the national news of Israel, part of the plan is to include news from Abraham Accords countries and other Middle East countries. Such an application should establish a board of trustees composed of academics and media professionals to build a strong vision and mission to ensure it continuously progresses, both technically and intellectually.

Other Avenues for Cooperation

Aside from official media cooperation, there are a number of avenues for coordination and encouragement of people-to-people engagement. Since social media usage is high, especially among young people, it is key for foreign ministries to invest in programs that can train users on how to identify and effectively challenge media bias or misinformation via citizen diplomacy. Though over-reliance on social media platforms can also be damaging or be subject to censorship, governments should take citizen diplomacy seriously (<https://www.atlantajewishtimes.com/citizen-diplomacy-necessary-or-redundant/>) and see it as a necessary rather than superfluous component of diplomatic efforts, due to its powers of persuasion. Through online people-to-people interactions, especially from a well-informed populace, both sides will gain an understanding of the others' viewpoints and interests. In order for citizen diplomacy to be an effective tool in conflict-resolution, these interactions must also remain unofficial—that is to say independent of government. The governmental role is to provide resources and training.

The arts likewise represent such an avenue. Shortly after the Abraham Accords were signed, an agreement was made between the Israel Film Fund and the Abu Dhabi Film Commission to promote peace and tolerance through the medium of film and television production. The agreement called for the establishment of joint training and development programs (<https://www.israel21c.org/israeli-uae-film-deal-aims-to-promote-tolerance/>) for Emirati and Israeli filmmakers, in partnership with Jerusalem's Sam Spiegel Film & Television School.

Moreover, the success of the media depends in part on its intellectual reference points. Here too, partnerships have already been created between Israeli and Emirati think tanks, such as the one (<https://www.israelhayom.com/2020/11/16/leading-israeli-think-tank-jiss-to-cooperate-with-top-uae-counterpart/>) between the Jerusalem Institute for Strategy and Security and TRENDS Research and Advisory of Abu

Dhabi in the United Arab Emirates on October 6, 2020. The Emirates Policy Center in Abu Dhabi and the Institute for National Security Studies in Tel Aviv likewise announced a [trilateral strategic partnership \(https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/news/press-releases/the-atlantic-council-emirates-policy-center-and-institute-for-national-security-studies-announce-strategic-partnership-to-advance-uae-israel-relations/\)](https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/news/press-releases/the-atlantic-council-emirates-policy-center-and-institute-for-national-security-studies-announce-strategic-partnership-to-advance-uae-israel-relations/) on October 15, 2020. There are numerous other Israeli think tanks that institutions from Gulf countries can look to for partnerships.

In all of these cases, more balanced media coverage would benefit all involved. Failing to address these issues can mean weakening the efficacy of the Abraham Accords' ability to lead to better relations for all parties, while also contributing to divisive narratives that can further destabilize the region. ❖

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