



# THE SLOWING DOWN OF ISRAEL-ARAB RELATIONS UNDER THE NETANYAHU GOVERNMENT

Nimrod Goren

## Key Points

- During the Netanyahu government's first five months, Israel-Arab ties have slowed down and tensions with the Palestinians have increased.
- Despite opposition to Netanyahu and his coalition, Arab leaders indicated a willingness to engage.
- Arab states have issued warnings or condemned statements, actions, and policies taken by the government or its far-right ministers.
- High-level Israeli-Arab engagement significantly decreased, but practical cooperation continued. Minilateral initiatives moved forward, excluding the Negev Forum summit, and preventive diplomacy enabled two regional security summits to be held.
- With Ramadan over, a cease-fire in Gaza, and turmoil in Israel quieting somewhat, there is potential for renewed Israel-Arab engagement and there are already signs this is happening.
- This trend will become more significant if the U.S. prioritizes it. That will require Netanyahu to show greater moderation on the Palestinian issue, limit extremists in his coalition, and further backtrack on democratic erosion. In return, the U.S. should advance regional security summits and the Negev Forum, include a Palestinian component in Israel-Arab cooperative endeavors and normalization efforts, and encourage the EU's recent initiative to advance a comprehensive regional peace.



## Introduction

Dynamics between Israel and the Arab world have taken a turn for the worse in the first few months of the current Israeli government. The positive momentum in Israel-Arab relations, which Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu himself was key in generating through the signing of the Abraham Accords in September 2020 and which picked up pace during the Naftali Bennett-Yair Lapid government that followed, has slowed down since the new government took office in December 2022.

Netanyahu initially sought to continue his regional achievements after taking over once again as prime minister, and Arab leaders at first played along. But this quickly changed given his government's harsh policies and extreme statements; soon, Arab warnings to Israel and condemnations of its actions became a recurring theme. In parallel, meetings between Israeli and Arab heads of state and ministers became increasingly rare, even though practical cooperation continued and previous understandings have mostly endured.

Under Israel's current government, only limited progress may be feasible in Israel-Arab relations. But conditions for positive change do

exist and include marginalizing Israeli extremists, avoiding a flare-up with the Palestinians, reducing the domestic turmoil in Israel, and ensuring the effective involvement of both the United States and the European Union.

## Netanyahu Sought Regional Continuity as He Re-entered Office

Regarding regional affairs, Netanyahu continued where he left off in June 2021, when Bennett replaced him as Israel's prime minister. Netanyahu's messaging and goals remained broadly similar, despite the regional and global geopolitical changes that took place while he was in opposition, such as the war in Ukraine. As before, Netanyahu still wanted to further develop the Abraham Accords, reach normalization agreements with additional countries, and continue to sideline the Palestinian issue when engaging with the region.

He did make fewer references than before to Iran as an issue that could bring Israel and Arab countries closer together, and he sought to benefit from the significant progress in regional relations achieved by Bennett and Lapid: the maritime border deal with Lebanon (that Netanyahu [opposed](#) while in opposition), the full restoration of ties with Turkey (that Netanyahu chose not to pursue in his previous term), and the establishment of the Negev Forum with the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Morocco, Egypt, and the U.S. (Lapid's major foreign policy achievement).

Days after his election victory on Nov. 1, 2022, Netanyahu stressed his commitment to advancing the Abraham Accords and his eagerness to see them [expanded](#) to "additional agreements and collaboration with Israel's regional neighbors." In a subsequent [interview](#) with the Saudi TV channel *Al Arabiya*, Netanyahu expressed hope for "a truly remarkable historic peace with Saudi Arabia [... that] would change our region in ways that are unimaginable" and "will form a quantum leap for the achievement for the resolution of both the Arab-Israeli conflict and ultimately, the Palestinian-Israeli conflict."

While presenting his new government in late December 2022, Netanyahu [reiterated](#) his desire to "dramatically expand the circle of peace" and [sought](#) U.S. support for Israeli-Saudi normalization, and in parallel continued to [bash](#) the Palestinian Authority (PA).

In his public statements, Netanyahu has emphasized that — contrary to the sequence laid out by the Arab Peace Initiative (API) of 2002 — he does not see progress with the Palestinians as a prerequisite for additional normalization with the Arab world. "I went around them [the Palestinians]; I went directly to the Arab states and forged a new concept of peace [...] When effectively the Arab-Israeli conflict [comes] to an end, I think we'll circle back to the Palestinians and get a workable peace," he [told](#) *CNN* at the end of January.

While Netanyahu was setting aspirational diplomatic goals, he was weakening the very governmental apparatus that paved the way for regional cooperation in the first place. Israel's Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), which was empowered under the Bennett-Lapid government after being sidelined by Netanyahu, was once again being [marginalized](#). As he did while in office previously, Netanyahu handed some of the MFA's responsibilities — among them, those relating to Iran, the Abraham Accords, and public diplomacy — to other government ministries, chief among them the Ministry of Strategic Affairs, headed by Ron Dermer, Israel's former ambassador to the U.S. and a close Netanyahu confidant.

Due to intra-party considerations and contradictory demands by Likud politicians, Netanyahu decided upon an unusual double [rotation](#) arrangement for the position of foreign minister, with Eli Cohen serving for a year, followed by Israel Katz for two years, and then Cohen again for another year. In an April 2023 [interview](#), Cohen admitted the formula was "less than ideal," adding, "It would be better to swap roles in the middle of the government's term, and I will speak about this with Israel [Katz] soon."

## Regional Leaders Initially Played Along

Netanyahu initially received a number of congratulatory messages from [regional leaders](#). These came in two waves: first, after his electoral win at the beginning of November, and second, after he formed the government at the end of December. Congratulations came via letters and phone calls from countries including the UAE, Bahrain, [Jordan](#), Egypt, Turkey, and Sudan. Regional leaders conveyed hopes for bilateral cooperation, aspirations for stability and peace, and [invitations](#) for visits and meetings. Even leaders with whom

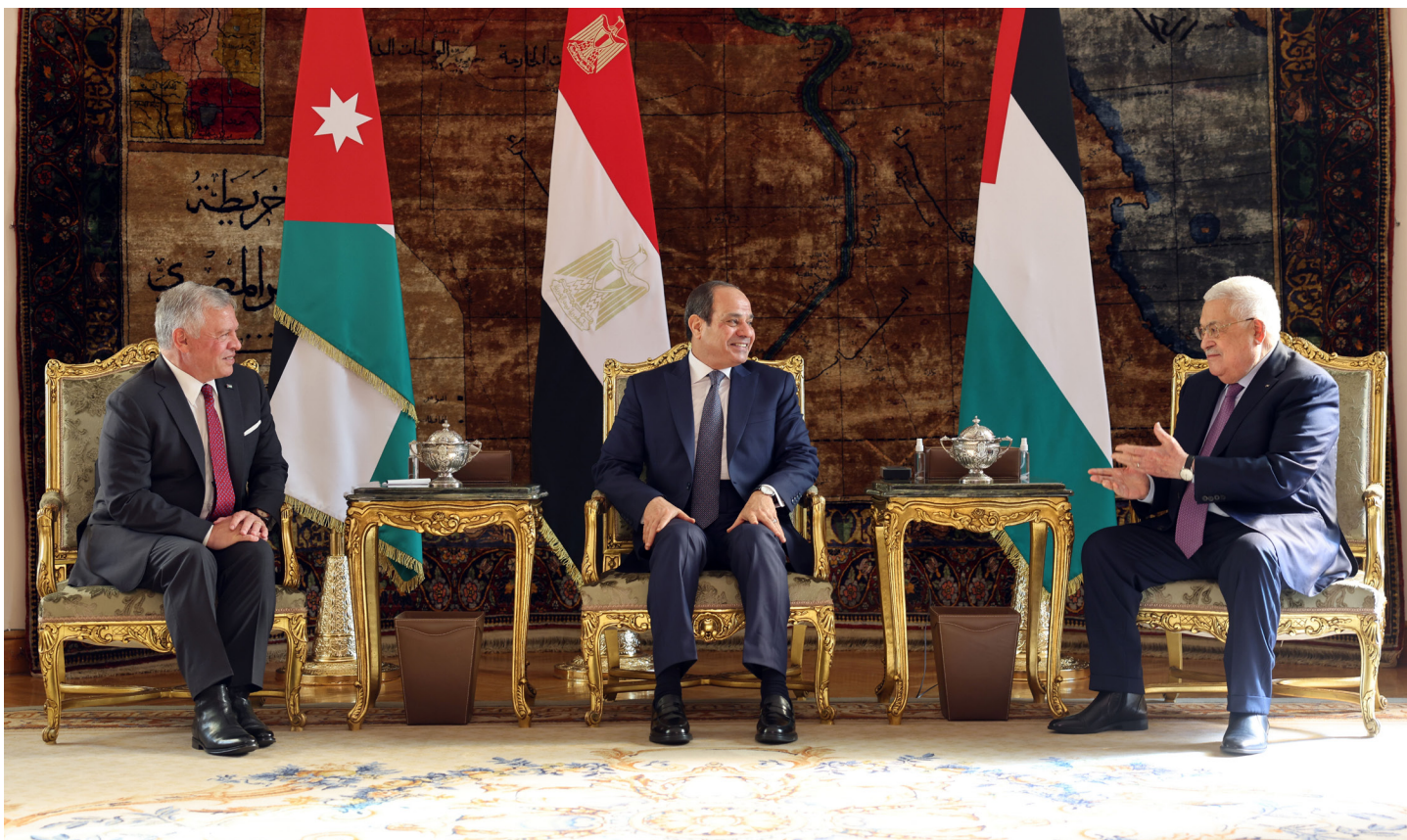


Photo above: Egyptian President Abdel-Fattah el-Sisi (C), Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas (R), and King Abdullah II of Jordan (L) meet for a summit in Cairo on Jan. 17, 2023. Photo by Palestinian Presidency/Handout/Anadolu Agency via Getty Images.

Netanyahu had frosty relations (to say the least) in the past, like Jordan’s King Abdullah and Turkey’s President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, were quick to engage and signal a more positive approach than in the past.

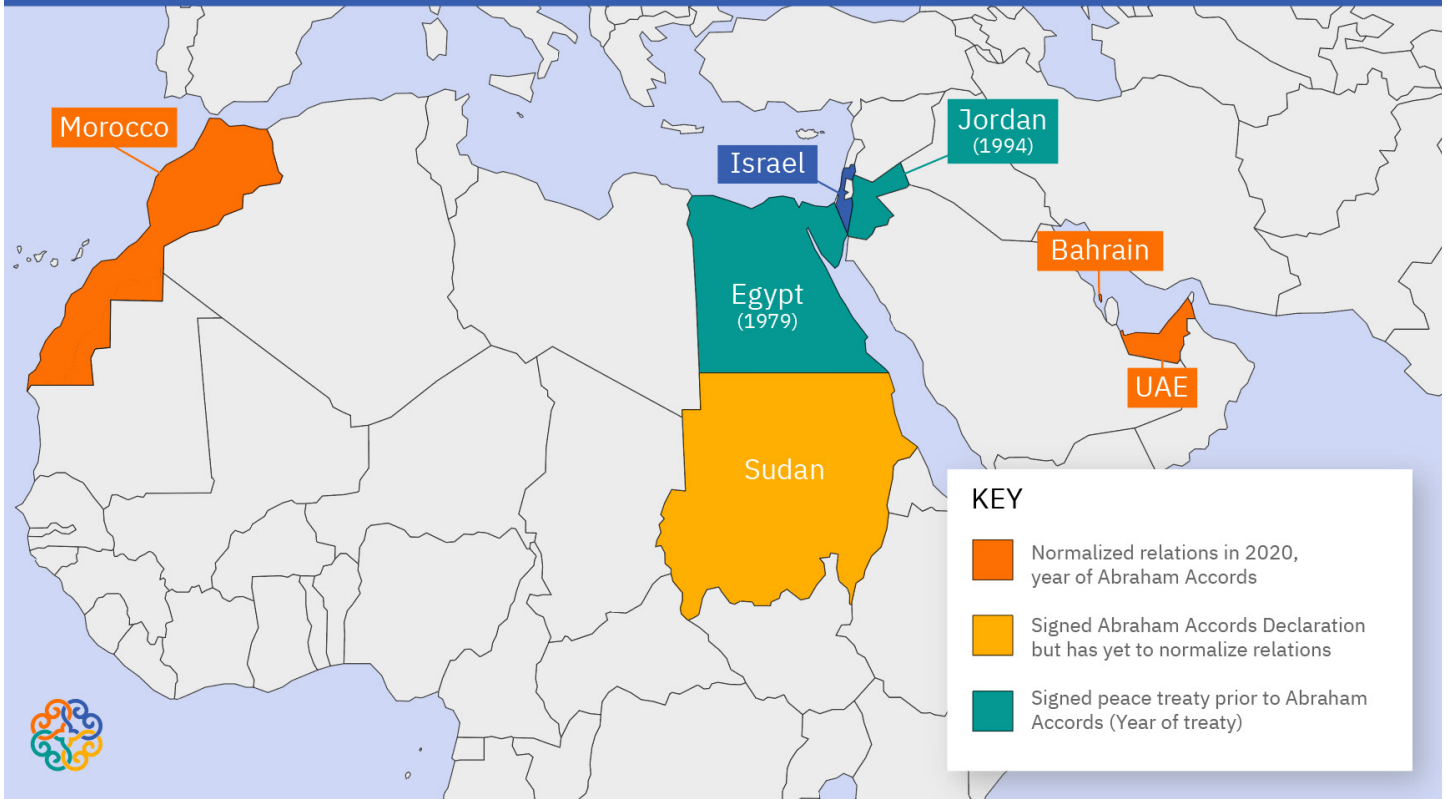
“Netanyahu believes in peace and we look forward to working with him” was the first message from [Bahrain](#); UAE leader Mohammed bin Zayed (MBZ) [shared](#) his desire “to strengthen bilateral relations, especially in the development fields, and to push forward the path of partnership and peace between the two countries”; Turkey’s Erdoğan [wrote](#) to Netanyahu that he believes “the new government will continue cooperation between the [two] countries in all areas, in a way that will bring peace and stability to our region”; and on it went.

Cohen received similar messages from regional counterparts upon his appointment as Israel’s foreign minister. The Egyptian foreign minister made sure to highlight in his message the need to advance the two-state solution. The

UAE and Bahrain went further than others — and surprised many in Israel — by having their ambassadors meet publicly with far-right ministers-to-be. The [UAE ambassador](#) invited Itamar Ben-Gvir to a reception, where he warmly and publicly shook hands with him. A few days later, the ambassador met Bezalel Smotrich at his office in the Knesset. Bahrain followed suit, with its embassy in Israel [inviting](#) Ben-Gvir to its annual reception. The official reasoning was that all Knesset members were invited, but in practice the meetings gave Smotrich and Ben-Gvir a legitimacy that others in the region and in the West were not willing to grant them.

While Netanyahu was welcomed back with goodwill messages from across the region, his reception was far from singularly rosy. Egyptian President Abdel-Fattah el-Sisi [emphasized](#) in his congratulatory call that Netanyahu should “refrain from any measures that could inflame regional tensions”; Jordan’s King Abdullah [warned](#) Netanyahu, in an interview with *CNN*, not to cross any “red lines” related to Jerusalem’s holy sites; and Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas, while

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acknowledging in an interview that he will “have no other choice but to deal with Netanyahu,” [stressed](#) that the Israeli prime minister “is not a man who believes in peace.”

## Patterns of Arab Warnings and Condemnations Emerge

There was no escaping the extremist make-up of the new Israeli government, its statements and policies on the Palestinian issue, the provocations by its far-right members, or the support they have given to settler violence.

Less than a week after Netanyahu’s government was sworn in, Ben-Gvir — in his new role as minister of national security — [visited](#) the al-Aqsa Mosque compound/Temple Mount in Jerusalem. Although the visit was a short and low-key one, it immediately sparked condemnations across the region. It was understood as the first in a potential series of provocations, aimed at shattering the status quo in Jerusalem, that the Arab world should strongly oppose.

Since then, there have been various forms of Arab warnings and condemnations toward Israel, criticizing the expansion of settlements, settler violence, incursions by the Israel Defense Forces (IDF), police actions in Jerusalem, use of force in Gaza, and the conduct of Ben-Gvir and Smotrich. The main Arab message has been that should such steps continue, escalation will be inevitable and ties with Israel might be downgraded, whether formally or de facto.

Arab leaders conveyed their messages through personal communication (Sisi’s call with Netanyahu and the UAE’s dispatch of an envoy), media statements (King Abdullah’s TV interview), declarations from joint summits (such as the Egyptian-Jordanian-Palestinian [summit](#) in Cairo in January 2023), and engagement with American and European officials (such as the Gulf Cooperation Council [letter](#) to U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken). In addition, multiple Arab foreign ministries published official condemnations of Israeli policies and advanced discussions on the issue at the U.N. Security Council (with the assistance of the UAE, a current non-permanent member).

The frequency of such warnings and condemnations — by both countries that have formal ties with Israel and by those that do not — intensified and became increasingly harsh over time, reaching a peak in March 2023, as tensions mounted around Ramadan. The UAE, for example, [condemned](#) Israel six times during the new government’s first 100 days, including four times in the month of March alone.

## Meetings Between Heads of State and Ministers Slow Down

Netanyahu had some unfinished regional business from his previous terms as prime minister. He has yet to make an official visit to the UAE for one. His planned trips there were canceled or postponed multiple times since the signing of the Abraham Accords in 2020. This has had an impact on cooperation between the two states, as Netanyahu has not allowed any other minister to visit the UAE before him. Therefore, when Netanyahu [announced](#) — 10 days after he won the elections — that he had been invited to the UAE, it seemed like things were off to a good start.

But following Ben-Gvir’s visit to the al-Aqsa Mosque compound/Temple Mount in early January, the UAE canceled the planned visit, officially due to technicalities. Strategic Affairs Minister Dermer made a subsequent secret [visit](#) to the UAE to pave the way for a Netanyahu trip, but the effort was unsuccessful. While Netanyahu was waiting for an invitation, former Prime Minister Bennett met MBZ in the UAE in March 2023, in a move that was understood in Israel as a sign of Emirati disapproval of Netanyahu’s policies.

The only public [meeting](#) Netanyahu has had with an Arab head of state since returning to office was with Jordan’s King Abdullah in Amman in January 2023. It was a significant meeting, as the two leaders had tense relations in recent years and did not communicate directly. The last time Netanyahu was in Amman was reportedly in 2018, for a secret visit. This time around the visit was officially announced — albeit only after taking place — although no photo was released. It was a chance for Jordan to convey its concerns about changes to the status quo in Jerusalem.

Israel-Arab ministerial meetings, which were common under the Bennett-Lapid government, became far more infrequent. Apart from Dermer’s secret trip to the UAE, the only public

## Key Facts: History of Israeli-Arab Normalization

- Israel currently has official diplomatic ties with five Arab countries: Egypt, Jordan, the UAE, Bahrain, and Morocco.
- Egypt was the first Arab state to sign a peace treaty with Israel, in 1979, in return for an Israeli withdrawal from the Sinai Peninsula it occupied in 1967. Jordan followed in 1994, a year after Israel and the PLO recognized each other via the Oslo Accords. Progress toward Israeli-Palestinian peace enabled Israel to establish ties with other Arab states, but these were cut after the outbreak of the second *intifada* in 2000.
- In 2020, following a gradual process, the Abraham Accords were signed, leading the UAE and Bahrain to normalize ties with Israel, with Sudan indicating it would follow suit when domestic conditions allow. Also in 2020, Morocco re-established the official ties it had with Israel in the 1990s. In 2022, Israel, the UAE, Bahrain, Morocco, Egypt, and the U.S. established the Negev Forum to advance multilateral cooperation.
- Israel for decades had unofficial and secret relations with most Arab states. Israel-Arab relations traditionally have a strong security dimension, but also increasingly include civilian, economic, and political cooperation.
- In 2002, the Arab League adopted the API, which promised Israel normal relations with the entire Arab world in return for peace with the Palestinians. The API did not generate progress toward Israeli-Palestinian peace. Currently, Saudi Arabia is seeking to update the API and possibly have it become a key part of a package of incentives for peace.
- Netanyahu has repeatedly rejected the need to move forward with the Palestinians as a condition for progress with Arab countries. While he seeks to advance ties with Arab states to bypass the Palestinian issue, others in Israel and the international community seek to leverage normalization to advance Israeli-Palestinian peace.

bilateral meeting was Foreign Minister Cohen's [visit](#) to Sudan in February 2023, with the aim of "signing an agreement later in the year." A few other ministerial-level talks were held in multilateral settings, such as meetings in Cairo between Energy Minister Katz and his [Egyptian](#) counterparts during the EGYP23 energy conference; meetings in New York between Innovation, Science, and Technology Minister Ofir Akunis and his Emirati and [Moroccan](#) counterparts during the U.N. Water Conference; and a meeting in Meknes between Economy Minister Nir Barkat and [Moroccan](#) Minister of Agriculture Mohammed Sadiki during the SIAM international agricultural exhibition.

Israeli hopes that Foreign Minister Cohen would be able to [visit Saudi Arabia](#) to participate in a U.N. tourism conference did not materialize due to Saudi opposition. And, more significantly, the planned ministerial summit of the Negev Forum, which was scheduled to take place in Morocco in March, was eventually [postponed](#) due to fears of a security flare-up during the month of Ramadan.

## Practical Cooperation and Previous Understandings Endure

The Israeli security establishment warned the government in May 2023 about an [erosion](#) in the Abraham Accords. This was also evident in the postponement of the Negev Forum summit and a subsequent request by the Arab countries involved to change the forum's [name](#) to one that is "less Israeli." Nevertheless, the agreements and understandings reached between Israel and Arab countries under the Bennett-Lapid government have generally continued during Netanyahu's first months in office.

**1. Implementation of previous agreements:** In March 2023, Israel and the UAE [signed](#) a customs union agreement enabling the free trade deal reached in 2022 to come into effect, and their bilateral trade volume continued to [increase](#). Also in March, the UAE officially [recognized](#) Israeli drivers' licenses, following a previous memorandum of understanding [signed](#) in 2022. Nevertheless, given developments in Israel and Israeli-Palestinian tensions, the UAE indicated it may halt some [weapons](#) purchases from Israel and [downgrade](#) its level of engagement. With Morocco as well, previous understandings continued to be implemented. The first meeting of the Moroccan-Israeli Joint Defense Cooperation

Steering Committee — led by top security establishment officials — [took place](#) in Rabat in January 2023. Israeli exports of natural gas to Egypt and Jordan also continued.

**2. Continuation of minilateral mechanisms:** Israel-Arab cooperation also continued through previously established minilateral mechanisms. This involved mostly diplomats and officials, not politicians. The I2U2 group — including Israel, the UAE, India, and the U.S. — [met](#) in February 2023 in Abu Dhabi to discuss international food security; Israel, Morocco, and the EU [convened](#) their first water dialogue on trilateral cooperation projects in March 2023, supported by a new EU funding scheme providing aid for Abraham Accords-related endeavors; Israel, Jordan, and the UAE [signed](#) — a week after the Israeli elections — a memorandum of understanding to advance their trilateral electricity-water swap deal; and Israel, Egypt, and the EU [met](#) in February 2023 in Cairo to review progress related to their 2022 tripartite memorandum of understanding on natural gas exports to Europe. The East Mediterranean Gas Forum (EMGF) also continued to convene its online [Executive Board meetings](#), which include Israeli, Palestinian, Egyptian, and Jordanian officials. In addition, during Ramadan, Israeli and Arab ambassadors [met](#) in [various](#) countries for joint *iftar* dinners.

**3. Engagement to prevent Israeli-Palestinian escalation:** Israel-Arab engagement was sustained in preventive diplomacy as well, but unlike in the other areas, new modalities were also established. Regional and international actors were wary of Israeli-Palestinian escalation around Ramadan and Passover, and many of them took steps in advance to increase coordination and support de-escalation. These efforts included separate meetings of Arab officials with their Israeli and Palestinian counterparts, as conducted by [Egypt](#) and [Qatar](#); as well as the convening of regional security summits in [Aqaba](#) and [Sharm el-Sheikh](#) that were, unusually, attended by both Israel and the PA, alongside Egypt, Jordan, and the U.S. When a cycle of warfare took place in Gaza in May 2023 between Israel and Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ), Egypt served as the lead mediator and [Qatar](#) also made an effort to help cool things down.

**4. Unofficial initiatives to build bridges and generate ideas:** On the unofficial level, regional civil society



Photo above: Foreign ministers from Bahrain, Egypt, Israel, the U.S., Morocco, and the UAE hold a joint press conference during the Negev Summit in Kibbutz Sde Boker, Israel, on March 28, 2022. Photo by Israeli Foreign Ministry/Handout/Anadolu Agency via Getty Images.

initiatives, such as those led by [ROPES](#), the [Mitvim Institute](#), [Atlantic Council](#), [Sharaka](#), [Start-Up Nation Central](#), and the [Anti-Defamation League](#), also continued — even if not always with the originally desired level of Arab participation. These initiatives convened regional policy dialogues; formulated ideas for the Negev Forum working groups; connected students, activists, professionals, and businesspeople; and enabled an exchange of knowledge and expertise. In addition, the private sector continued to develop business cooperation, including via umbrella organizations, such as the [UAE-Israel Business Council](#).

## Further Normalization Does Not Seem to Be on the Horizon

Netanyahu's initial aspiration to expand the Abraham Accords did not prove to be realistic at a time when merely maintaining existing relations with the Arab world has been

a challenge. Following repeated statements from Netanyahu about a possible normalization with Saudi Arabia, the Saudi foreign minister [emphasized](#) in January that peace with Israel will only come by giving the Palestinians a state. Later on, *The Wall Street Journal* [published](#) an article spelling out other Saudi conditions for normalization, including U.S. security guarantees and assistance developing its civilian nuclear program. Some more recent developments in May 2023 seemed to indirectly pave the way for steps toward a future Israel-Saudi normalization, including a [visit](#) by U.S. officials to the kingdom, in which regional connectivity projects were discussed, and [reported calls](#) (about flights for Israeli pilgrims to Mecca) between Netanyahu and Mohammed bin Salman (MBS) before and after the May 19 Arab League summit in Jeddah.

Whatever the real Saudi conditions are, it is clear that the stars have not yet aligned for Israeli-Saudi normalization under the current government. The March 2023 normalization agreement between Saudi Arabia and Iran suggests that the

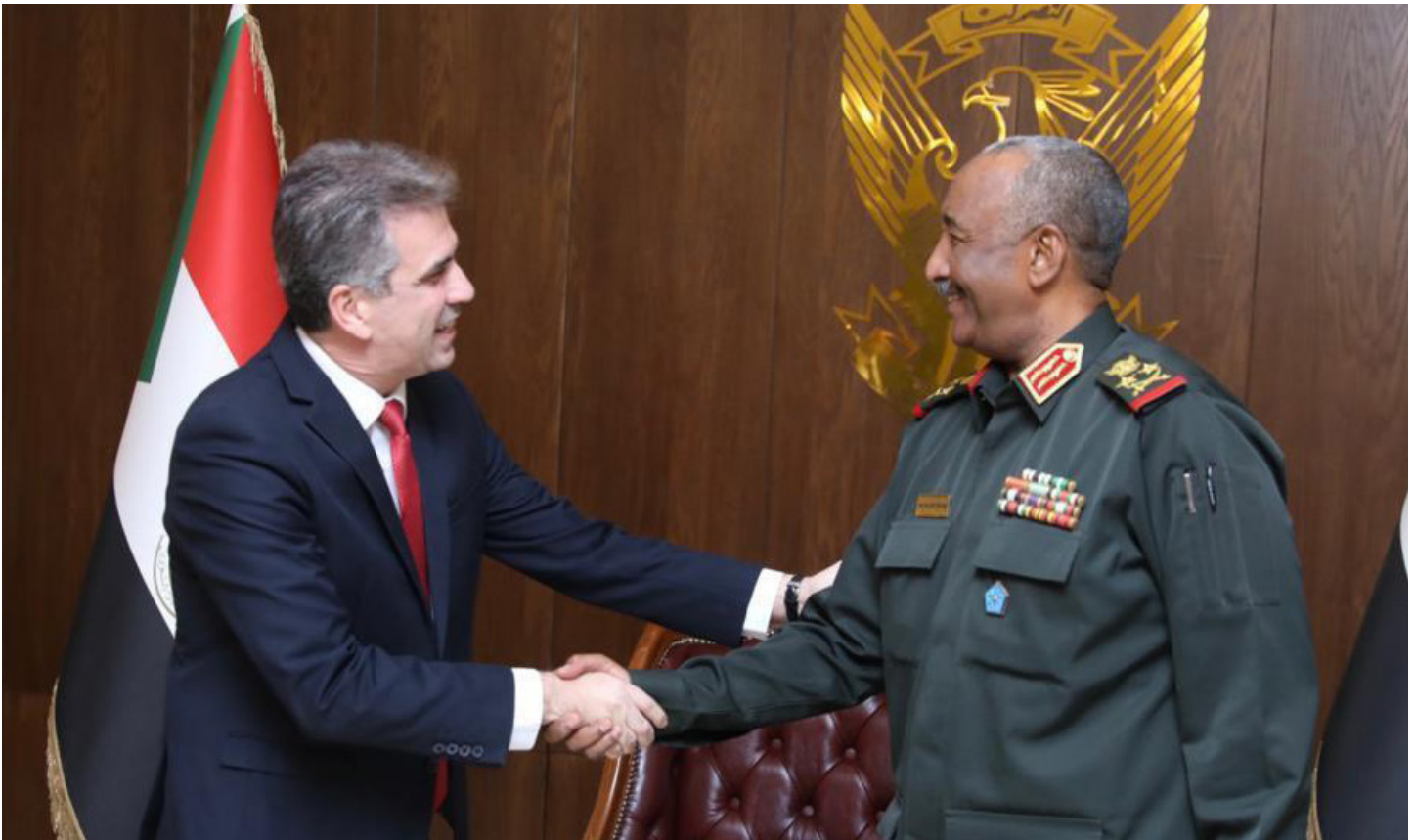


Photo above: Israeli Foreign Minister Eli Cohen and the Chairman of Sudanese Sovereignty Council Abdel-Fattah al-Burhan meet in Khartoum, Sudan, on Feb. 2, 2023. [Photo by Sudan Sovereignty Council/Handout/Anadolu Agency via Getty Images.](#)

Saudis may be [heading](#) in a different direction. Moreover, Saudi Arabia has recently condemned Israeli policies multiple times, using negative terms that it has not used for years; in parallel, it [denied](#) visas for Israeli guests who were initially accepted to participate in a U.N. tourism conference in al-Ula; and, to highlight its seriousness about the need to achieve a two-state solution, it [engaged](#) with the EU and the Arab League on a possible international package of incentives for peace, including the API.

President of the Emirates Policy Center Dr. Ebtesam al-Ketbi also recently voiced a lack of optimism regarding future Israel-Arab normalization, saying at the May 2023 Herzliya Conference that [no additional Arab states](#) will join the Abraham Accords because of the current Israeli government, which is an embarrassment to the UAE.

In the meantime, Israeli Foreign Minister Cohen has been looking for breakthroughs in other arenas. Apart from his visit to Sudan, the Israeli media reported that Cohen

was [seeking](#) to advance normalization with Mauritania, Somalia, Niger, and Indonesia. But in the absence of meaningful progress toward further normalization, Israel had to settle for other types of achievements, such as the [opening](#) of Omani airspace to Israeli carriers (as the Saudis already did), the Qatari [decision](#) to extend World Cup visas through 2023, including for Israelis, and the participation of an Israeli diplomat at the U.N. Conference on the Least Developed Countries in Qatar.

## Conditions for Positive Change in Israel-Arab Relations

Developments during the Israeli government's first five months in office have taken their toll on Israel-Arab relations. This downward trend is likely to continue — with ups and downs along the way — throughout this coalition's tenure. Nevertheless, during the second half of May, some signs of an uptick in ties became evident: indications that the



previously postponed Negev Forum ministerial summit is [set to convene](#); conversations between Netanyahu and MbS, as well as between Foreign Minister Cohen and his [Bahraini counterpart](#); Minister Miri Regev's announced visit to Morocco; and the UAE's official [invitations](#) to both President Isaac Herzog and Netanyahu to attend the 2023 U.N. Climate Change Conference (28th Conference of the Parties, COP28) in Dubai. For this new trend to be sustainable, enabling Israel and its Arab neighbors to maintain their current ties, and perhaps even to expand them to a certain extent, fulfilling the following conditions will be key:

- 1. Marginalizing Israeli extremists.** To advance regional cooperation, Netanyahu will need to convince his Arab counterparts that the far-right elements within his government are not running the show. He should act to prevent provocations, minimize the scope of extremist statements, emphasize that they do not reflect official governmental positions, clearly condemn and counter settler violence, and fulfill the commitments Israel made during the recent regional security summits.
- 2. Avoiding a flare-up with the Palestinians.** When the new Israeli government was established, there was a widespread assumption both regionally and internationally that a quick Israeli-Palestinian flare-up might be inevitable. Attention was focused on the overlap between Ramadan and Passover in early April, and regional cooperation efforts were put on hold until after this sensitive period. After Ramadan ended without a major uptick in violence and with the conclusion of the recent Israel-PIJ cycle of warfare in Gaza, Arab countries may be willing to advance steps with Israel they were not willing to take during the first months of 2023. Preventing further escalation with the Palestinian should be a top priority for the Israeli government.
- 3. Easing domestic turmoil in Israel.** Instability inside Israel lessens the motivation of Arab countries to engage with the Israeli government. Should doubts persist in the region about Netanyahu's control over his government, ability to deliver on promises, capacity to ensure economic well-being and regional stability, and acceptability in Washington, advancing regional cooperation will be difficult. If, however, Netanyahu backs down from his judicial overhaul, positive change

in Israel-Arab ties will be more likely, due to the domestic implications of such a move. Netanyahu [took steps](#) in April to divert attention from the judicial overhaul, but did not indicate that his original goals and intentions have actually changed.

- 4. Having the U.S. on board.** Arab countries are attentive to the messaging coming out of Washington. Relations between President Biden and Netanyahu are currently in crisis mode; should that continue, it will signal that the U.S. may not be determined to press regional countries to step up their cooperation with Israel at present. It will also indicate that closer cooperation with Israel does not necessarily mean better access to the U.S. administration. If Biden and Netanyahu manage to change course — namely, if Netanyahu backtracks on democratic erosion and pursues more moderate policies on the Palestinian issue — the U.S. administration may once again invest more significant time and energy in advancing regional cooperation and convey expectations in that regard to Arab leaders.
- 5. Convening regional gatherings.** To get Israel-Arab relations back on track, as much as possible, efforts should be made to convene several regional gatherings in the months ahead: the Negev Forum ministerial summit (postponed from March and reportedly now [set to take place](#) at the end of June); the biannual ministerial meeting of the EMGF (in which Egypt, Jordan, and the PA are to take part); any regional security meetings planned as a follow up to the Aqaba and Sharm el-Sheikh summits; and minilateral meetings related to I2U2, the Israel-Jordan-UAE water and electricity deal, and the Israel-Egypt-EU energy export agreement.
- 6. Continuing the EU's engagement.** Even as Israel-Arab cooperation slowed down in early 2023, efforts in which the EU was involved as a partner continued. This was an initial sign of success for EU engagement, indicating the identification of fields of cooperation that provide concrete benefits and address real needs. The EU is seeking a role to play in the Abraham Accords, and its early engagement makes clear that it has a potential added value. Moreover, the EU's new funding scheme to support Abraham Accords-related endeavors can incentivize additional cooperation between Israel and Arab countries.

## Recommendations for U.S. Policymakers

- 1. The U.S. should sustain and further develop the model of regional security summits**, both as a channel for dialogue between Israeli and Palestinian officials with the inclusion of Egypt and Jordan, and as a tool of preventive diplomacy. Despite prevailing skepticism about this mechanism, the mere establishment of such a regional channel is a worthy achievement and is also of potential benefit for Israel-Arab ties.
- 2. The U.S. should work to convene the Negev Forum** ministerial summit, which was previously postponed. Efforts on this front [appear to be underway](#) and making progress. The U.S. can present Israel with conditions (related to the Palestinian issue and democratic erosion) under which it will play a more active role in making this happen and in advancing concrete projects coming out of the Forum. Appointing a U.S. official as special envoy to the Abraham Accords (as has also been [suggested in Congress](#)) — someone who is committed to leveraging the Accords to advance Israeli-Palestinian peacemaking — can assist in fulfilling their regional potential.
- 3. The U.S. should advance the inclusion of a Palestinian component in Israel-Arab cooperative endeavors**, while acknowledging and accepting the Palestinian opposition to formally taking part in the Negev Forum. Efforts should be made to ensure that existing regional projects (such as the Israel-Jordan-UAE water-electricity swap deal) also benefit the Palestinians, and to include Palestinian interests and needs in new projects that may be developed by the Negev Forum working groups.
- 4. The U.S. should ensure that discussions about additional normalization between Israel and Arab or Muslim countries are advanced in a way that promotes Israeli-Palestinian peacemaking**, rather than bypasses the issue. The U.S. can help the Israeli public understand the linkage between developments in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the scope of possible relations between Israel and Arab countries. Moreover, it can provide support through the Middle East Partnership for Peace Act (MEPPA) to

civil society and business initiatives that include a mix of Israeli, Palestinian, and regional partners.

- 5. The U.S. should encourage the EU's renewed efforts to advance comprehensive regional peace** and to produce a coordinated international package of incentives that will be presented to both Israelis and Palestinians. In that regard, the U.S. should update its security plan for the two-state solution, devised during the Obama presidency, and it should be part of the EU's engagement with Saudi Arabia and the Arab League on updating the API to increase its relevance in light of regional changes over the past two decades.

*Dr. Nimrod Goren is Senior Fellow for Israeli Affairs at the Middle East Institute and President of Mitvim — The Israeli Institute for Regional Foreign Policies.*

*Cover photo: Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu (C) and members of his government give a statement to the media before the vote on the national budget, on May 23, 2023. Photo by GIL COHEN-MAGEN/AFP via Getty Images.*