



The Program for Learning in Partnership

Expanding Arab-Israeli Partnership Beyond the Abraham Accords: A Citizen-Driven Approach



For decades across the Middle East and North Africa, Arab states and Islamist movements have employed brainwashing, violent intimidation, and draconian “anti-normalization laws” to arrest human relations between their societies and Israeli citizens. This edifice of estrangement not only blocked Israeli civil engagement with the many Arabs whose governments did not recognize the Jewish state; it also ensured a “cold peace” in Egypt and Jordan, where diplomatic and security ties with Israel did not mature into a peace between peoples.

The signing of the Abraham Accords in 2020 between Israel and four additional Arab countries heralded the beginnings of a paradigm shift, as most of these governments pledged to augment their formal ties with concerted Arab-Israeli cooperation in the civil sector. They repealed their anti-normalization laws, de-platformed hostile teachers and preachers, and fostered new frameworks for trade and investment, knowledge and technology transfer, tourism, and education for peace. More than two years later, an assessment of the state of civil engagement between Israelis and their Emirati, Bahraini, and Moroccan peace partners found that much remains to be overcome in truly normalizing human relations among them.¹ Yet few dispute that the Accords dealt a hammer blow to Arab Rejectionism, and that the cracks in its wall continue to spread.

The cracks are in fact spreading far beyond the territory of the Abraham Accords. On the one hand, more Arab governments appear interested in partaking of the Accords. On the other, the desire among Arab populations to engage Israelis now manifests openly – even and especially in lands where Rejectionists exert control. Witness the four Arab countries which the Tehran government dominates and calls its “Axis of Resistance”: Lebanon, Iraq, Syria, and Yemen. In September 2021, 312 Iraqis from across that country convened publicly in the northern city of Erbil to demand that Iraq, too, join the Abraham Accords. Seven months later in the Lebanese town of Beit Anya, Shi’ites, Sunnis, Druze, and multiple Christian denominations came together under the auspices of the Maronite Patriarch to call on Lebanon to depart the “Axis of Resistance” and repeal its own anti-normalization laws. These populations, like their Yemeni and Syrian neighbors, understandably associate Rejectionism with the outcomes it has delivered to them: civil strife, state failure, and economic ruin. Looking to the UAE, Israel, Bahrain, and

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<http://transatlanticpolicy.com/article/1161/warm-peace-in-the-making-%E2%80%93-examining-p2p-relations-two-years-to-the-abraham-accords>

Morocco, they not only see security, resilience, and hope; they also sense the contours of a new “Abrahamic Axis” in their region and want the opportunities it brings.

As an NGO active in fostering these trends, the Center for Peace Communications has launched a series of efforts to gauge specific opportunities for civil cooperation between Israelis and their neighbors in unnormalized Arab countries. The initiative, which we call the Program for Learning in Partnership, adopts three premises. First, where an Arab country’s nominal central government fails to meet the basic development needs of its people, special efforts should be exerted to help motivated civilians fill the gap. Second, Arab civilians who want development advice or assistance from Israelis have an inalienable right to pursue it, and attempts to punish them for doing so, whether by a government or a non-state actor, are inherently illegitimate. As Western democracies reject all violations of human liberty, they should enact policies and approaches that defy anti-normalization laws and practices, sanction their enforcers, and defend the victims. Third, Arab countries at peace with Israel are natural hubs for civil cooperation between Israelis and their neighbors in unnormalized lands. Some Arab signatories to the Abraham Accords have affirmed as much and begun to establish frameworks to facilitate such work.

Over the past year, with these principles in mind, CPC convened joint discussions among Egyptian, Iraqi, Iranian, Israeli, Lebanese, Syrian, and Tunisian nongovernment specialists in healthcare, water technology, mechatronics, and education. On the basis of one of the discussions, the group also piloted a knowledge transfer operation between Israel and northeastern Syria. These unusual engagements not only show that more is possible; they also call for reevaluating a time-honored facet of U.S. policy in the region: for decades, U.S. government endowments that support peace and development in the Middle East and North Africa have waged Arab development projects without Israeli participation, while limiting Arab-Israeli peace promotion to Israel and the Palestinian territories. Today, half the Arab population of the Middle East and North Africa reside in countries formally at peace with Israel – and as CPC efforts reflect, many living outside the “Abrahamic Axis” view Israelis as natural partners in development. Arab-Israeli civil cooperation to address the region’s challenges not only presents a more efficient means to advance development than many prior approaches; it also popularizes peace by demonstrating its tangible benefit to the population.

Outcomes and Implications

The following is a summary of the Program for Learning in Partnership's five initial engagements.

A knowledge transfer operation in northeastern Syria

In summer 2022, the Arab Council for Regional Integration, a pan-Arab initiative supported by the CPC, led a program to help Kurds and Arabs in northeastern Syria begin to address two significant development challenges on their territory: water scarcity and the abundance of landmines. In a 35-hour virtual class organized by the Council's Syria chapter, an Israeli Druze mechatronics teacher in the Galilee taught ten engineering students in the Syrian town of Qamishle to build a roving landmine detector, as well as a device that regulates the temperature and humidity of greenhouses. The teacher and his students became friends, and local authorities who had green-lighted the program asked for more such help.

An after action discussion convened the Arab Council Syrian chapter leader, the Israeli teacher, the local co-organizer of the class in Syria, and an administrative officer at nearby Rojava University. The latter participant called for expanding cooperation between her institution and Israeli centers of advanced learning. The Israeli instructor responded by noting the abundance of virtual learning modules available in Israel, many of which have already been translated into Arabic. The local Syrian co-organizer of the class described the enthusiasm shared by every peer he had invited to take part, indicating that cultural conditions for broader engagement are ripe. Significantly, the project did not involve any uniquely Israeli expertise: the devices Syrians learned to construct used Italian circuit boards and non-Israeli open source technology. What justified the project to local authorities, who spent their own money to purchase the equipment, was the quality of the instruction, the ease of linguistic communication, and the basic sense of kinship between two peoples sharing a border.

These outcomes point to several ways in which the U.S can support further Arab-Israeli partnerships for development. The first relates to the fact that a sub-state actor – northeastern Syria's Autonomous Administration – welcomed Israeli assistance whereas its Rejectionist

government in Damascus does not. The U.S. should not wait for failing national governments to reconstitute themselves before engaging *all* sub-state actors – whether in Syria, Iraq, Yemen, Libya, or elsewhere – as part of the emerging Abrahamic Axis. The second way in which the U.S. can move the process forward relates to the observation that the Arab Council’s Syrian endeavor was initiated by Syrian civilians – not their local leadership – who in turn appealed to their authorities for support. The U.S. can foster this trend by lending special support to citizen-led, “bottom-up” efforts, while also fostering official support from the top down. Third, in light of the essential role an Arab citizen of Israel played in making the Syrian endeavor a success, the U.S. should work to encourage greater involvement by Arab Israelis in their country’s outreach across the region.

A trilateral discussion of climate change and water scarcity in the Fertile Crescent

A first-of-its-kind webinar brought together a former senior Iraqi official in the Ministry of Water Resources, the Director of International Relations at the Kinneret Innovation Center in Israel, and a Syrian American social entrepreneur to discuss the water scarcity crisis in the Fertile Crescent. The webinar covered the severity of the crisis as well as Israel’s success in managing its own water scarcity problem and emergence as one of the world’s leaders in water technology. Participants urged cooperation in the field among Israelis, Iraqis, and Syrians.

The Israeli participant noted that Jordan, Morocco, and the United Arab Emirates have already forged bilateral agreements with Israel on water-related issues. Among them, both Morocco and the UAE have created structures to spread the benefit of these partnerships to other countries in the region. The Iraqi participant agreed that such frameworks provide a natural context in which to convene experts from across the Fertile Crescent to conceptualize multilateral projects to address water scarcity. Should the United States choose to support the envisioned cooperation, it could further advance the global struggle against climate change, deliver valuable assistance to countries in need, and make a new contribution to advancing peace and prosperity in the Middle East.

A plan for Iraqi-Israeli medical cooperation

A separate webinar gathered physicians in Israel and Iraq to discuss potential medical cooperation between the two countries. Participants parsed the many challenges facing Iraq's collapsing healthcare sector — including endemic corruption, the dearth of skilled doctors and nurses, and severely under-equipped hospitals and clinics — and noted Israel's success in the field and emergence as one of the best healthcare providers in the world. Despite the May 2022 decision by Iraq's parliament to intensify punishment for the slightest human contact with Israeli citizens, the participants agreed that neither politics nor ideology should obstruct partnership to save lives.

Exploring potential work together, the two physicians envisioned training programs for Iraqi doctors by Israeli peers, likely on the soil of Abraham Accords states, as well as unofficial hospital pairing between the two countries. Pinpointing Iraq's urgent need for ultrasound technology, they conceived a plan to move new Israeli ultrasound devices — inexpensive, small in size, and easily transported — into the country. They conceived of methods to do so which could circumvent corruption in Iraq's healthcare bureaucracy by ensuring that equipment and expertise actually reached the people who need it.

The latter point bears highlighting given the difficulties the U.S., Iraq's largest humanitarian donor, has faced in trying to prevent the plundering of American aid. Part of the answer may lie in underwriting the type of knowledge transfer and low-cost medical equipment supply which the Iraqi and Israeli physicians call for. Support for medical education and training through virtual learning programs offers an impactful form of assistance which the Iraqi political class cannot loot. The small size of Israel's low-cost ultrasound technology, for its part, allows for varying delivery channels and strategies to prevent theft of the equipment by militias or the state.

A new approach to Arab education reform

In the fourth event, Tunisian, Iraqi, and Israeli education specialists gathered to discuss schools reform in Arab countries. Arab participants stressed deeply ingrained problems in their respective countries' education systems: they deny critical thinking skills to students, rendering them vulnerable to manipulation, while instilling hate toward both the distant "other" — typically Westerners, Israelis, and Jews generally — and local minority ethnicities, sects, and ideas. As the

Tunisian participant put it, “The most radical generation is my generation – the ones in their forties – because we were raised on racism.” Participants observed that many school teachers reinforce their educational bureaucracies’ rejection of efforts at reform. If critical thinking and peace education remain alien to much of the region, they agreed, the ongoing education for violence and strife will continue to undermine civil peace, regional integration, and development.

The group saw lessons to be drawn from two contrasting efforts to address these problems which have been waged in recent years. Following the September 11, 2001 attacks, democratic governments and NGOs pressed a number of Arab states to end incitement and indoctrination in their schools. Their work included the monitoring and public exposure of Arab textbooks, as well as legislative measures tying foreign aid to demonstrable improvement. In their time, these measures did not for the most part achieve their intended result. More recently, however, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Morocco reached their own decisions to eradicate hate from textbooks, teach tolerance, and restore knowledge of the region’s finer periods of friendship among faiths. On the one hand, their actions reflected homegrown choices, unrelated to foreign pressure. On the other, having set out to wage reform, several of these governments appealed for advice and validation to the same Israeli-American NGO that had been monitoring their work all along. So there is indeed a role for non-Arab educational reformists to play in fostering change, participants concluded. Some countries where prospects for such joint work remain weak, such as Tunisia and Iraq, are nonetheless allied with Israel’s peace partners, such as Morocco and the UAE. Thus the latter countries can potentially apply their own influence to advance the required connectivity, or host multilateral gatherings on their territory to that end. As to Arab lands dominated by Iran, its allies, or other hardened Rejectionists, it is possible to circumvent their educational bureaucracies by providing virtual learning modules to parents and children online. Arabs, Israelis, and their Western allies should work together to build content and delivery mechanisms, and forge virtual connectivity between students in these imprisoned territories and teachers beyond their borders – rather than cede yet another generation to mass brainwashing.

A new approach to Arab education reform

In the fifth event, participants from Egypt, Iraqi Kurdistan, Iran, and Lebanon joined Israeli author Yossi Klein Halevi to discuss the regional implications of the latter’s book *Letters to my*

Palestinian Neighbor. Combining an earnest, introspective, and sometimes self-critical narration of Israelis' shared identity with a message of curiosity and empathy for Palestinians, the book attracted interest among Palestinians, including hundreds of responses to Halevi in the form of Palestinian "letters to my Israeli neighbor." The panel explored whether the "Letters" phenomenon could serve as a template for generating and sustaining empathic dialogue in other regional conflict zones.

Participants warmed to the concept. Some identified obstacles to its appropriation which they saw as distinctive to their respective environments. These included "metaphorical fences erected by years of politically enforced social separation" (Iraqi Kurdistan) and the Islamist drive to "stigmatize all other faiths as threats to the unity and survival of the *umma*— the larger 'community of the faithful'" (Egypt). Other panelists saw special opportunities to adopt Halevi's model in distinctive ways – among them, "the opportunity afforded by diaspora communities in the West to overcome the physical and metaphysical barriers that have arisen in the old country" (Iran and Lebanon). The panel began to envision follow-on efforts to develop more specific projects for implementation, perhaps incorporating Halevi and his Palestinian interlocutors as presenters of a case study to a multinational group of implementers.

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In light of the opportunities described above, it behooves the U.S. Government to integrate its enduring commitment to Arab development into its longstanding policy of promoting Arab-Israeli peace. A number of important steps in this direction have recently been taken. They include the 2022 formation of the Negev Forum, whereby Israel and most of its Arab partners came together under American auspices to explore civil cooperation in education, health, energy, tourism, food, and water. They also include a new American law passed in 2022 – the Israel Relations Normalization Act – which requires the government to develop a strategy to advance regional integration in civil and diplomatic realms alike, as well as report annually on anti-normalization laws and practices that obstruct such progress.

Each of these promising measures amounts to a seed that must be nurtured. The Negev Forum civil sector working groups need finance, political capital, and sustained effort if they are to deliver actual ventures with tangible outcomes. In unnormalized countries, meanwhile, Arab

civilians' growing hope for development partnership with Israelis will be dashed unless the U.S. and Abraham Accords signatories support their aspirations and push back on Rejectionist forces that torment them. To the latter end, the newly mandated State Department report exposing anti-normalization laws and practices provides at most a basis for deliberation: it must serve to bring new consequences for Rejectionist enforcers, as well as protections for civil peacemakers.



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