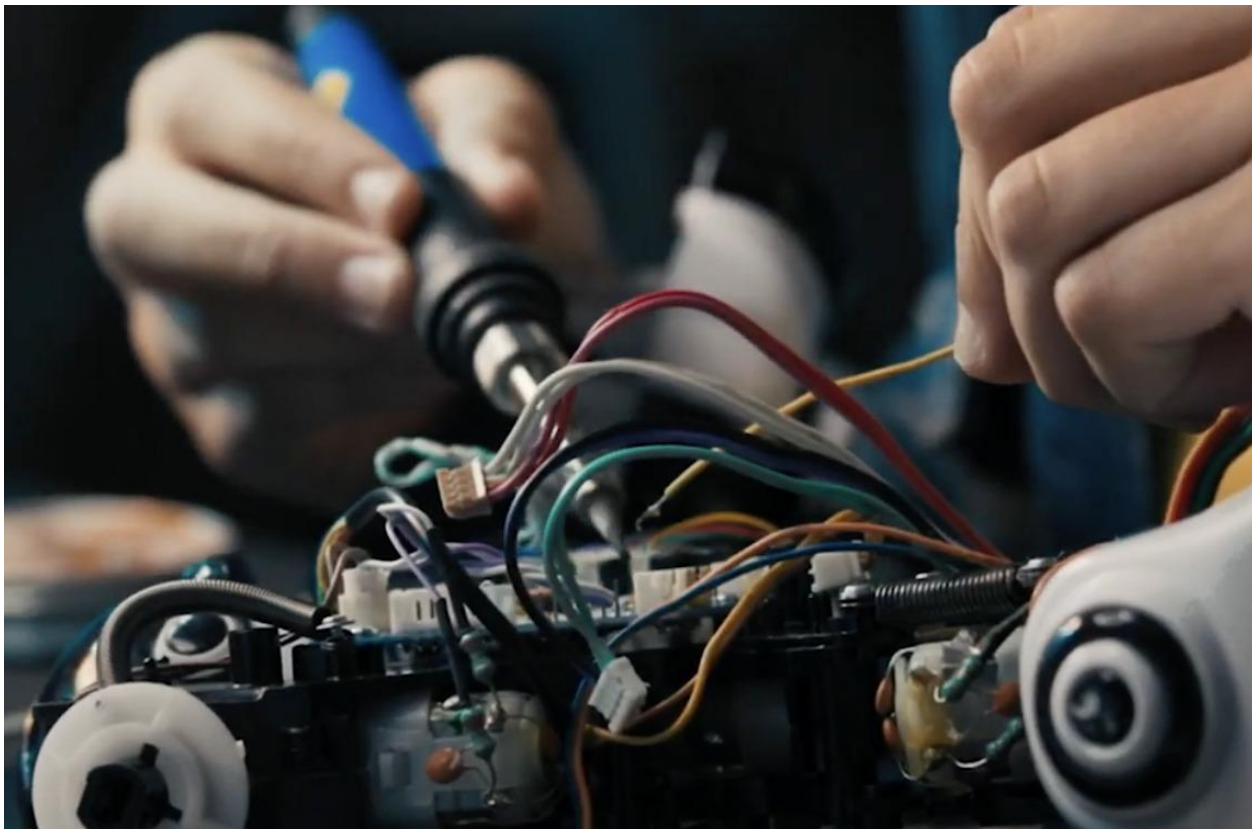




The Program for Learning in Partnership

Israeli Development Assistance in Northeastern Syria: A Pilot Project with Implications for U.S. Policy



The Arab Council for Regional Integration, a civil initiative supported by the Center for Peace Communications, has piloted a program to help the people of northeastern Syria begin to address two significant development challenges: water scarcity and the abundance of landmines on their territory. 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 Qamishle to build a self-driving landmine detector and 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.

In effect, the project pursued two consensus U.S. policy goals which the U.S. Government has traditionally considered unrelated: support Arab development and promote civil engagement between Arabs and Israelis. For decades, the U.S. has operated a range of programs to advance human and economic development in the expanse of the Arab region, but largely without Israeli participation. It has also waged efforts to grow Arab-Israeli civil engagement – but rarely if ever outside Israel and the Palestinian territories. A reconsideration of this conceptual divide is now in order. Since the advent of the Abraham Accords, half the Arab population of the Middle East and North Africa now reside in countries formally at peace with Israel, and their respective governments have signaled openness to developmental cooperation with Israel's civil sectors. This trend is rapidly growing beyond the Abraham Accords states, moreover, in that Arab public demand for partnership with Israeli citizens demonstrably exceeds the territory of Israel's official peace partners.

The Biden administration has begun to address the new reality by initiating the Negev Forum, which brings together Israel and most of its Arab government peace partners to explore civil cooperation in education, health, energy, tourism, food, and water. Congress, for its part, passed a law in 2022 mandating a new government strategy to promote regional integration as well as an investigation by the State Department into anti-normalization laws and practices that obstruct such progress.

The outcomes of the Arab Council's work in Syria point to several ways in which the U.S. can augment its strides toward fostering Arab-Israeli partnerships for development. First, given pent-up demand for cooperation with Israelis in the region's many as-yet unnormalized countries, the U.S. can encourage Abraham Accords states to serve as beachheads for cooperation in the

broader region. Second, given that sub-state actors such as northeastern Syria's Autonomous Administration welcome Israeli assistance although the central government in their country does not, the U.S. should engage all favorably disposed sub-state actors as part of the emerging Abrahamic Axis. Third, as the Arab Council's Syrian endeavor was initiated by Syrian civilians and only then green-lighted by their authorities, the U.S. should pursue the opportunity to promote regional integration from the bottom up, while also fostering Arab support for these endeavors from the top down. Fourth, in view of the essential role an Arab citizen of Israel played in making the Syrian endeavor a success, the U.S. should work to foster greater involvement by Arab Israelis in their country's outreach across the region.

The following paper outlines the challenges facing northeastern Syria which the Arab Council sought to address, explains the Council's motivation and role in the project, summarizes an after action discussion in which participants reflected on the outcomes, and assesses implications for U.S. policy.

I. Challenges in Northeastern Syria

The problems which the effort sought to address bear contextualizing. Beginning in 2012, de facto control of areas in Northeastern Syria fell into the hands of Kurdish fighters as Syrian regime forces withdrew from the area. In the following years, this liberated territory would further expand: the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) — a coalition of Kurdish, Arab and Assyrian militias— aided by Western airstrikes and training, battled the Islamic State and defeated it in March 2017. Since then, despite Turkish incursions and threats by Syrian regime forces, the region has enjoyed relative peace compared to other territories impacted by the Syrian civil war. Today this territory, covering around 31,000 square miles and containing approximately two million inhabitants, is governed by the Kurdish-led Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria. In addition to the presence of Arab tribes alongside Kurds in the territory, many Syrians from elsewhere in the country have found refuge here over the past decade of war. This new ingathering, adding further diversity to the population and enriching the leadership's human networks across Syria, has enhanced the potential for the northeast to serve as a beachhead for future change in other parts of the country.

Despite the defeat of the Islamic State and ensuing relative calm, conditions in northeastern Syria remain challenging. Nearly encircled by hostile forces, the region's only access to the outside world runs through a single border crossing to the Kurdistan region of Iraq. That crossing, however, is controlled by the

Kurdish Democratic Party, an ally to the Syrian Kurds' Turkish adversary. The Autonomous Administration relies on Western aid and support, and is striving urgently to boost self-reliance.

The Problem of Landmines

During the Syrian civil war, all parties to the conflict have employed landmines, both to protect their territories and to inflict casualties on their opponents. A recent United Nations study last year found that Syria is the country with “the highest number of victims caused by explosive ordnance globally.”¹ The UN estimates that “since 2015, landmines and other explosive remnants have on average killed or injured five people every day.”² By 2017, “the World Health Organization estimated over 86,000 accidents [that] had led to amputation.”³ The UN estimates that “about 10.2 million people, or roughly half of all Syrians, live in areas contaminated with explosive devices.”⁴ As to northeastern Syria in particular, its situation with respect to landmines ranks worst within the country. The Islamic State planted the devices extensively while it held the territory, then to an even greater degree toward the end of its reign when its position became more desperate. In 2018, Human Rights Watch estimated that “homemade landmines have killed or injured hundreds of civilians, including more than 150 children in Raqqa, since the Islamic State was pushed out of the city.”⁵

It fell on the SDF and its international allies to clear landmines in order to enable families to return to their homes.⁶ But as Human Rights Watch reports, while Western members of the anti-ISIS international coalition have provided some support for de-mining work, including training locals for the job, “international support has not risen to the challenge,” and “local demand for de-mining is far outstripping existing services.”⁷ As of April 2022, “local and international agencies say they have collectively removed about 35,000 anti-personnel and anti-vehicle landmines throughout the region but thousands more remain.”⁸ The task is further complicated by the fact that in northeastern Syria, “it is rescue workers who take on the daunting task of sweeping for landmines and detonating them, in the absence of state

¹ “Faceless killer: Syria landmines keep sowing death,” France 24, 11 July 2022, available at:

<https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20220711-faceless-killer-syria-landmines-keep-sowing-death>

² “Faceless killer: Syria landmines keep sowing death,” France 24, 11 July 2022, available at:

<https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20220711-faceless-killer-syria-landmines-keep-sowing-death>

³ “Syria,” The Halo Trust, available at: <https://www.halotrust.org/where-we-work/middle-east/syria/>

⁴ “Faceless killer: Syria landmines keep sowing death,” France 24, 11 July 2022, available at:

<https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20220711-faceless-killer-syria-landmines-keep-sowing-death>

⁵ “Syria: Landmines Kill, Injure Hundreds in Raqqa,” HRW, 12 February 2018, available at:

<https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/02/12/syria-landmines-kill-injure-hundreds-raqqa>

⁶ Chapman, Lucas & Ali Ali, “Unexploded landmines continue to kill and maim indiscriminately in Syria’s Northeast,” Arab News, 3 April 2022, available at: <https://www.arabnews.com/node/2056106/middle-east>

⁷ “Syria: Landmines Kill, Injure Hundreds in Raqqa,” HRW, 12 February 2018, available at:

<https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/02/12/syria-landmines-kill-injure-hundreds-raqqa>

⁸ Chapman, Lucas & Ali Ali, “Unexploded landmines continue to kill and maim indiscriminately in Syria’s Northeast,” Arab News, 3 April 2022, available at: <https://www.arabnews.com/node/2056106/middle-east>

support”⁹ — and that “with the Syrian healthcare system already under strain, many victims receive little or no assistance.”¹⁰ Due to the lack of any landmine maps, moreover, mine detection is called for on nearly every stretch of the territory.¹¹ As a result, much of the area remains off-limits to agriculture or any other form of development.

Underdevelopment and Attrition

Prior to the civil war, decades of Assad rule over northeastern Syria saw little effort to develop the territory. Guided by the Ba’ath Party’s Arab Nationalist ideology, the regime in Damascus adopted an active discrimination policy against the region’s Kurdish majority population. Beyond excluding Kurds from most government positions, revoking the citizenship of hundreds of thousands, and banning education in the Kurdish language, the Assads also practiced demographic engineering: they transferred thousands of Arabs into the area, nationalized much of the Kurds’ fertile land, and gifted the latter to the Arab newcomers. Damascus meanwhile declined to establish any institutions of higher education in the area.¹²

The situation bears comparison with neighboring Iraqi Kurdistan. Beginning in 1991, Iraq’s Kurds established autonomy amid continuing Ba’athist rule in Iraq, thanks to an American-enforced no fly zone. Freed to set their own policies, they turned to Israel and its people as partners to help overcome generations of neglect under their rulers in Baghdad. Israelis provided training and assistance, both in security and the gamut of civil sectors from agriculture to healthcare. Equivalent levels of Israeli engagement with the Kurds of Syria’s northeast, by contrast, did not follow the latter’s establishment of autonomy in 2017. Nor have the United States or others provided grand-scale assistance outside the realm of security.¹³

Yet the region brims with potential. Located between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, it has been a major wheat and cotton producer and enjoys some oil fields. In the face of constant threat from neighboring militias and states, the Autonomous Administration has begun to build its own university, introduced greenhouse agriculture alongside efforts to modernize farming, and signaled to outsiders far and wide that it seeks new allies to help develop the territory.¹⁴

⁹ “Faceless killer: Syria landmines keep sowing death,” France 24, 11 July 2022, available at:

<https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20220711-faceless-killer-syria-landmines-keep-sowing-death>

¹⁰ “Syria,” The Halo Trust, available at: <https://www.halotrust.org/where-we-work/middle-east/syria/>

¹¹ “Landmines sow death and fear in war-torn Syria,” I24news, 11 July 2022, available at:

<https://www.i24news.tv/en/news/middle-east/levant-turkey/1657537474-landmines-sow-death-and-fear-in-war-torn-syria>

¹² Sam didn’t bother to cite anything about what’s stated in this paragraph. I’m sure there’s an article or paper that aggregates the litany of Kurdish grievances against the Assads, so please find a credible one and cite it.

¹³ Please find something to back up the last two sentences.

¹⁴ Some backup for these assertions would be helpful. I also suspect that this rendering by Sam of the territory’s potential is shoddy. Mineral resources? Anything else? Whatever it is, it belongs here.

II. The Arab Council's Motivation and Role

Enter the Arab Council for Regional Integration, a multinational body supported by the Center for Peace Communications that aims to “foster a spirit of partnership that knows no borders.” The nature of the group’s mission bears explaining. At its launch in 2019, 32 civic actors from 15 Arab countries called for an end to the boycott of Israel and its citizens, on the grounds that the boycott had lost the region billions in trade, denied Arabs the benefit of partnership with a rising power, blocked Arabs from building bridges between Israelis and Palestinians, and inaugurated a style of demonization and blame deflection that only fractured Arab countries from within.¹⁵ Having proclaimed this view, Council members proceeded to advocate for the many Arabs who face intimidation and persecution for espousing it. To this end, they called for repealing “anti-normalization laws,” which prescribe prison or death to civilians who encounter an Israeli citizen or even suggest that doing so would be a good idea.¹⁶ Through political engagement with Western partners, moreover, they inspired a law in the United States that instructs the State Department to report annually on Arab government retribution for civil peacemakers.¹⁷

For most Arab Council members, the case for advancing Arab-Israeli civil engagement is one component of a larger mission to clear *all* identity-based obstacles to development and progress in the Middle East and North Africa. Several members preached this message in Yemen through a series of Arab Council charitable events in mosques.¹⁸ Others in North Africa produced media programming designed to challenge the culture of demonization.¹⁹ A few sought to put the Arab Council vision into practice by circulating proposals for cross-border partnership to address the region’s most pressing needs.²⁰

The advent of the Abraham Accords in September 2020 brought a new sense of possibility which rallied the Arab Council’s growing member base. Not only did the Accords make it possible to pursue Arab-Israeli partnership without fear on the soil of the Arab states that had signed it; the same treaty also established a new axis of powerful countries, bound together in peace, which has inspired countless Arabs suffering under Rejectionist domination across the region. Such was the sentiment in a conference hall in northern Iraq in September 2021, for example, when 312 Iraqis from six governorates convened, in open defiance of Iranian militias, to demand that their country, too, join the Abraham Accords.²¹

When the Arab Council set out to pilot its first development project in 2022, it chose to deploy in northeastern Syria, for two reasons. First, the territory is a rare stretch of unnormalized frontier that features both bottom-up demand and top-down support for peace and development. On the one hand, as in

15 Cite NY Times writeup of Arab Council conference.

16 <https://english.thearabcouncil.net/articles/protect-the-arabs-who-engage-in-dialogue-with-israeli-citizens>

17 <https://www.portman.senate.gov/newsroom/press-releases/portman-booker-introduce-legislation-supports-israel-urges-community>

18 Link to one of the Yemen ACRI videos

19 Link to Noamane’s song.

20 <https://english.thearabcouncil.net/essays/community-dialogue-to-bridge-gaps-between-the-arab-states-and-israel>

21 Cite Erbil conference page on CPC web site.

Iraq, the population of northeast Syria knows the pain of Rejectionist rule and jihadist occupation and aspires to chart an altogether different, brighter course. On the other, by contrast to Baghdad's present Iran-dominated government, northeast Syria's governing authority wants to enable rather than obstruct new international partnerships for development — even in the face of pressure and threats from Turkey, Iran, the Assads, and the Islamic State.

The Council's second reason for the choice of northeastern Syria relates to the area's diverse population. As noted earlier, decades of demographic engineering by the Assads followed by mass internal displacement wrought by civil war have brought the rainbow of Syria's ethnic and religious denominations to the northeast. In such an environment, progress toward development is also a victory for the ideal of a more integrated region — and provides a potential lodestar for the many Arab countries torn by civil war and ethnic strife. "If we can show the region that the northeast Syrian model works," observed Arab Council Syria chapter head Ahed Al-Hindi, "then we can bring our approach to any country where national reconciliation enjoys popular demand."

Low-tech, high-impact knowledge transfer

The Arab Council's needs assessment identified de-mining and smart agriculture as two of the Syrian northeast's most urgent development needs, then conceptualized the beginnings of an answer. In keeping with the local leadership's desire to foster self-reliance, the Council found low-cost technologies which the Autonomous Administration could afford, and devised a straightforward means to transfer the requisite knowledge and expertise. The Council identified Arduino, a cheap Italian-made open-source electronics platform that combines versatile hardware with a software interface any coder can use to give the hardware its marching orders.²² Syria's Autonomous Administration agreed to purchase the hardware, while Arab Council specialists identified two pieces of relevant software available free. The first software package turns the Arduino device into a landmine detector. When mounted on a simple remote control rover akin to a child's toy, it can hunt for mines across large stretches of territory. The second piece of software reprograms Arduino to monitor and regulate the temperature and humidity of a greenhouse so as to boost its agricultural yields.

Northeast Syrian authorities recruited local engineering students to learn how to program the devices. The Arab Council recruited a suitable teacher for them: Majd Thabit, a mechatronics instructor, is an Israeli citizen of Druze origin residing in the Galilee. In addition to possessing the requisite knowledge, he harbored a special advantage in teaching it: his native Arabic, inflected with a dialect and sensibilities quite similar to those of neighboring Syria. Over a six-week, 35-hour Zoom course, he took the Syrian students step-by-step through the process — and built a cadre of locals ready and eager to build tools that save lives and boost crops.

²² Cite the "About Arduino" section of the Arduino web site.

Significantly, this cross-border civil engagement did not conform to conventional notions of Israel as an exporter of hi-tech innovations to the region. The knowledge Thabit transferred was decidedly low-tech, and the low-end hardware which the Syrians purchased for the project did not even originate in Israel. The Syrians chose to adopt the project for the simple and practical reason that it offered a better value and greater prospects for success than any alternative they could find. By contrast, some larger and loftier efforts at Israeli-Arab knowledge and technology transfer have missed their mark. In these cases, it was not for lack of impressive technology, but rather for missing knowledge of a given Arab country's particular needs and ineffective communication between the Israeli and Arab participants. The Arab Council's Syrian pilot project highlights that it is possible to overcome these obstacles, and that more is possible.

III. An After Action Discussion

Following the successful implementation of the project, Center for Peace Communications Senior Fellow Samuel Tadros hosted a webinar bringing together some of the Syrian, Israeli, and American participants. These included "Mariam" (name withheld for security reasons), an administrator at Rojava University in the northeast Syrian town of Qamishli; "Ahmed," the Qamishli engineering student who organized the virtual course; Majd Thabit, the Israeli instructor; Ahed al-Hindi, the Syrian chapter director for the Arab Council for Regional Integration; and Joseph Braude, President of the Center for Peace Communications.

Ahed al-Hindi began by reviewing the outcomes and outlining next steps for Syrians to deploy the new devices. "We're proud of how much we did in so short a time," he said. "The implications are significant for a range of other sectors in northeast Syria, where there is the same urgent need for affordable capacity building." The welcome role of an Israeli teacher, he added, shows that forward-looking leadership in the region no longer wants to allow the paralyzing politics of the past to impede progress toward a better future.

Israeli instructor Majd Thabet described his experience teaching the course as a "dream come true:"

Just six months ago, I had imagined opening a school for people in Lebanon via Zoom. The Lebanese have lost everything. In Syria as well, we see the problems there and always wonder, what can we do to help? How can we assist these people who are just like us? We feel for them, and they live right next door. But there has been no way to help. Then this opportunity came. At the beginning I was a little nervous. What would it be like to meet them? How are we going to talk to each other? What will they think of me? It turned out to be quite natural, as we are all humans living on this planet.

"Mariam," the Rojava University administrator, shared a perspective which she characterized as the consensus view among her colleagues. "Today, in northeastern Syria we are trying to establish self-rule. If we do not teach and train this generation to administer our own territory, we will remain dependent on

outside cadres. ... All universities around the world that would like to join hands with Rojava, including Israeli ones, are warmly welcomed to do so.”

Center for Peace Communications President Joseph Braude, for his part, saw broader implications. “The U.S. maintains a longstanding commitment to what it calls “Arab development,” which for decades amounted largely to exporting Western knowhow, whether from the U.S. or Europe, to Arab countries that needed it most. But as a matter of principle, why go far when the solutions are nearby? Perhaps the same American development institutions can make a new kind of contribution by facilitating intraregional partnerships, including between Israelis and their Arab neighbors, that bring the peoples of the region together to solve their own problems.”

IV. Implications for U.S. Policy

The Arab Council’s deployment in northeastern Syria offers a small but telling example of how Arab-Israeli connectivity to solve local problems can advance two consensus U.S. policy goals simultaneously: address urgent Arab development challenges and warm the climate for people-to-people relations between Israelis and their neighbors. In this respect, the endeavor combined two types of work which the U.S. Government has traditionally regarded as unrelated.

Consider that on the one hand, for decades the U.S. has operated a range of programs to promote development in the expanse of the Arab region, but largely without Israeli participation. These programs include the MENA division of USAID, the State Department’s Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI), and the four beneficiaries of the Congressionally-supported National Endowment for Democracy (the National Democratic Institute, the International Republican Institute, the AFL-CIO Solidarity Center, and the Chambers of Commerce). On the other hand, the U.S. has also supported efforts to build Arab-Israeli civil engagement — for decades, in Israel and the Palestinian territories only. With rare exceptions, it has pursued these two types of efforts separately, each as if the other did not exist.

The bureaucratic wall between Arab development and Arab-Israeli engagement is now obsolete, while the holistic approach which the Arab Council piloted in northeastern Syria is the way of the future — for four key reasons. First, since the signing of the Abraham Accords, half the Arab population of the Middle East and North Africa now reside in countries formally at peace with Israel,²³ and their respective governments have signaled openness to developmental cooperation with Israel’s civil sectors. Second, as reflected in the evidence cited above that public support for normalization is growing among Iraqis and Syrians, Arab public demand for partnership with Israeli citizens far exceeds the territory of Israel’s official peace partners. Relatedly, the draconian anti-normalization laws that punish such cooperation are increasingly unpopular with Arab publics.²⁴ Third, in a region of fractured, war-torn states where no central

²³ In my Hill piece with Dennis, there’s a citation for this fact. Please include it.

²⁴ Cite TOni Nissi’s WSJ piece.

government enjoys the credibility and agency to choose peace, substate actors such as the Syrian SDF are making their own decisions about foreign engagement, and increasingly looking to Israeli citizens as partners. Fourth, as evidenced by the facility with which an Israeli Druze instructor communicated with his newfound Syrian peers, key segments of Israel's population enjoy not only expertise of great relevance to their neighbors' needs but also the ability to transfer it more effectively than experts from distant lands.

It therefore behooves the U.S. Government to integrate its 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 peace partners have come together under American auspices to explore civil cooperation in education, health, energy, tourism, food, and water.²⁵ They also include a new American law passed in 2022 — the Israel Relations Normalization Act — which requires the administration to develop a strategy to advance regional integration on the civil as well as diplomatic levels, as well as report annually on anti-normalization laws and practices that obstruct such progress.²⁶

The Arab Council's work in Syria points to several ways in which the U.S. can augment its own initial steps toward fostering Arab-Israeli partnerships for development:

- **Regard Abraham Accords states as beachheads to the broader region:** From Morocco to the UAE, Abraham Accords signatories have expressed their desire to spread the benefits of partnership with Israelis to populations beyond their borders. They can do so by convening multilateral gatherings of sector specialists from both normalized and unnormalized Arab countries, and by serving as a hub for sustained cooperation. The U.S. should recognize this potential, incentivize Abraham Accords states to build on it, and apply its leverage in unnormalized Arab states to ensure the safety of civilians who participate.
- **Engage sub-state governing actors:** The case of northeastern Syria highlights that in a fractured country with a Rejectionist regime, sub-state governing actors may not wish to wait for the central government to change before partaking of the benefits of partnership with Israeli citizens. As the U.S. stands with the SDF and other autonomous governing entities in matters related to security, it should also support their growing aspiration to join Israel's circle of peace partners.
- **Enable civil cooperation driven by actual civilians:** Though the Arab Council's venture enjoyed the blessing of northeastern Syria's Autonomous Administration, it was initiated by Syrians outside government who lobbied their authorities to green-light the effort. In seeking to encourage such efforts, the U.S. must not only tap Arab governments but also directly engage Arab civilians who wish to serve as vanguards of Arab-Israeli partnership. As the region's most successful endeavors

²⁵ Cite some State Dept summary of the Negev Summit / Forum from their web site.

²⁶ Find a summary of the contents of the IRNA law and cite it.

arise from cooperation from the bottom-up *and* the top-down, American support for Arab-Israeli civil partnership calls for a strategy to push from both directions.

- **Foster a prominent bridge-building role by Israel's Arab citizens:** As noted earlier, the ease with which Israeli Druze mechatronics teacher Majd Thabet formed a bond with his Syrian students reflects their shared language and sensibilities. The many Israeli Arabs who have entered the professions in Israel, from healthcare to hi-tech, have a natural role to play as facilitators of civil cooperation. U.S. Government development work in the area, which already includes efforts to engage Israel's Arab minority, should foster and incentivize greater involvement by this community in the country's outreach across the region.



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