

Unfreezing the Abraham Accords:

A New Transatlantic Strategy for Greater Peace, Stability and Integration in the Middle East

By Barak M. Seener



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Cover image: *President Trump and The First Lady Participate in an Abraham Accords Signing Ceremony* from the Trump White House Archive.

Table of Contents

About the Author	4
Acknowledgements	4
About the Henry Jackson Society	5
About the Centre for the New Middle East	5
Foreword by Harley Lippman	6
Executive Summary	7
Introduction	9
I. Unfreezing the Abraham Accords Through Greater Military Integration	16
II. Unfreezing the Abraham Accords Through Stronger Trade Integration	28
III. Threats to the Abraham Accords	36
Conclusion and Recommendations	43

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About the Henry Jackson Society

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About the Centre for the New Middle East

The Centre for the New Middle East is a one-stop shop designed to provide opinion-leaders and policy-makers with the fresh thinking, analytical research and policy solutions required to make geopolitical progress in one of the world's most complicated and fluid regions.

Established following the fallout from the Arab Spring, the Centre is dedicated to monitoring political, ideological, and military and security developments across the Middle East and providing informed assessments of their wide-ranging implications to key decision makers.

Foreword by Harley Lippman

The October 7 massacre perpetrated by Hamas was interpreted by many as an attempt by Iran to wield its terrorist proxy to scupper the Abraham Accords spearheaded by President Trump that were initially signed on the White House lawn by the US, Israel, the UAE and Bahrain on 15 September 2020. Despite the subsequent escalation in regional tensions, GCC states have remained steadfast in their commitment to remain a part of the Accords. Both the UAE and Bahrain share the same interest in seeing Iran's proxies dismantled, and so does Saudi Arabia, which continues to negotiate towards diplomatic normalisation with Israel. This is as the heightened threats to regional security posed by the Houthis in Yemen and Khataib Hezbollah in Iraq, Hezbollah in Lebanon and Hamas in Gaza endanger the economic diversification efforts of GCC states. Those efforts are driven by a desire to modernise, epitomised in the Arabian Gulf by the visionary Saudi leader Mohammed bin Salman who has spearheaded the Kingdom's social and economic transformation and whose vision for Saudi Arabia is futuristic by Western standards.

This momentum towards modernisation led the UAE, Bahrain and Morocco to join with Saudi Arabia in blocking anti-Israel measures at an emergency summit held in Riyadh on 11 November 2023 by the organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) and the Arab League. Bahrain's Minister of Finance and National Economy, Sheikh Salman bin Khalifa al-Khalifa asserted in the Bahraini newspaper Al-Ayyam that the Abraham Accords must be secured as it "will underpin a secure, safe region in which we are delivering prosperity for all and delivering hope and opportunity."

The Abraham Accords will become increasingly resilient as more Western nations become signatories. This will have the effect of deepening the Accords, broadening its appeal for states like Saudi Arabia to normalise relations with Israel and integrate its military systems within the region's emerging security architecture. This in turn serves the dual purpose of increasing deterrence vis a vis Iran while preventing GCC states from gravitating towards China's sphere of influence.

This report by Barak Seener outlines the Middle East's future economic and security trends and offers an essential blueprint for how Western states can effectively harness the region's dynamics to contribute towards greater prosperity and ultimately peace that has until now eluded the region.

Harley Lippman was appointed by the Biden Administration to serve on the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) Partnership for Peace Fund whose charter is to build economic, social and political connections between Israelis and Palestinians.

Executive Summary

On 15 September 2020, the UAE, Bahrain and Israel signed the Abraham Accords which “recognize[d] the importance of maintaining and strengthening peace in the Middle East and around the world based on mutual understanding and coexistence, as well as respect for human dignity and freedom, including religious freedom”.¹ The Abraham Accords offer opportunities for direct flights, people-to-people exchanges, business partnerships and government agreements that have all led to greater security ties between the signatories and increased investment and economic growth in the area. This led, in December 2020, to Israel and Morocco agreeing to re-establish diplomatic ties; the following month, Sudan signed the Abraham Accords declaration, agreeing to normalise ties with Israel.²

The Abraham Accords is a product of the US seeking to withdraw its assets from the region, while anchoring its strategic interests in a new regional security and economic framework. In turn, this offers a context for the UK to advance its own economic and security interests in the region.

However, in the wake of the 7 October terrorist attack against Israel, further progress on the Accords has been frozen. At the same time, China’s increasing influence in the region presents an alternative source of security and economic engagement. Meanwhile, the proxies of Iran (Hamas, the Houthis and Hezbollah) seek to stop the establishment of a new security architecture built around the Abraham Accords that would constrain Iran’s ability to threaten its neighbours.

To revive the Accords, and keep the region Westwards facing, the UK needs to work alongside the US to develop a renewed transatlantic strategy for the Gulf, one that integrates both trade and security issues.

However, the UK has failed to outline a clear military strategy towards the Arabian Gulf. This lack of clarity coincides with the UK decommissioning ships and a reduced number of frigates in its service fleet which affects the UK’s future ability to project power in the Middle East and protect trade.

The UK can help unfreeze the Abraham Accords by:

- increasing its defence spending and developing a clearly delineated strategy toward the Gulf
- working to deepen the interoperability of its military forces with US platforms, and at the same time encouraging interoperability with Gulf allies

¹ “The Abraham Accords Declaration”, U.S. Department of State, 15 September 2020, <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Abraham-Accords-signed-FINAL-15-Sept-2020-508-1.pdf>

² “Israel says Sudan peace deal to be signed later this year”, France 24, 3 February 2023, <https://www.france24.com/en/africa/20230202-israel-and-sudan-agree-to-fully-normalise-ties-later-this-year>

- taking more seriously the competitive threat in the region from China's growing influence, and actively pursuing a counter-strategy alongside the United States
- developing a clear escalatory ladder of potential responses to deter Iran from further use of proxy attacks, while taking action at home to proscribe the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), prevent Iran Air from operating at British airports, and to ban Iranian banks from operating in the City of London
- leveraging its economic and trade ties in the region by pursuing a GCC-wide FTA, plurilateral or bilateral free trade agreements (FTAs) or regulatory alignment with Abraham Accords countries and wider Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) allies, to increase economic integration that can spill-over to greater military integration and counter Iran's disruptive influence along with China's growing economic influence in the region
- joining the Abraham Accords as a co-signatory alongside the US

Introduction

In the wake of the appalling terrorist attack against Israel on October 7, there were widespread concerns that the US-led plan to stabilise the region through increased ties between Israel and its Arab neighbours, known as the Abraham Accords, would be an inevitable casualty of the ensuing conflict. The perpetrators of the massacre, Hamas, are backed by Iran, and an important motive for Iran encouraging Hamas, Hezbollah and the Houthis to attack was seen to be an attempt to fracture the Abraham Accords and prevent Saudi Arabia from normalising relations with Israel, negotiations for which, brokered by the Biden Administration, were almost complete. Despite the presence of US aircraft carriers in the region aimed at deterring Iran and preventing an escalation of the conflict in Gaza, Iran appears to be intent upon escalating and regionalising tensions. This affects the deepening and broadening of Gulf trade and the security collaboration driven by the Abraham Accords which in turn undermines economic and security access for the US and UK.

Iran's strategy has not succeeded as it hoped. Saudi Arabia remains eager to normalise relations with Israel, while also advancing the prospect of a Palestinian state.³ Abraham Accord signatories have also indicated, at least in private, that their ties with Israel will continue.⁴

Yet with Israel's war of self-defence ongoing, the Abraham Accords remain frozen, waiting for new diplomatic efforts to revive their potential. At the same time, the new Western-facing regional order promised by the Accords is under threat from the growing influence of China in the region. This makes the need to unfreeze the Accords, and regain the initiative, all the more important.

This paper argues that the UK has an important role to play in unfreezing the Abraham Accords, by leveraging its diplomatic ties with GCC states as well as its regional economic and security interests. By working alongside the United States, the UK can help deliver a new transatlantic strategy that integrates both trade and military power, stabilising the region and countering both Iranian and Chinese influence.

³ Andrew England, "Arab nations develop plan to end Israel-Hamas war and create Palestinian state", *Financial Times*, 18 January 2024, <https://www.ft.com/content/11890426-0250-4a3c-ba48-d8523924eb9c>

⁴ Agnes Helou, "As tensions rise over Israel's fight in Gaza, why a UAE official says Abraham Accords will endure", *Breaking Defense*, 2 November 2023, <https://breakingdefense.com/2023/11/as-tensions-rise-over-israels-fight-in-gaza-why-a-uae-official-says-abraham-accords-will-endure/>

Why the UK Needs the Abraham Accords to Work

In 2022, Prime Minister Rishi Sunak declared: “the UK is in a strong position to leverage its historic relationships with other Gulf states to widen the [Abraham] accords and I would like to see UK diplomats place a greater focus on this.”⁵ It remains very much in the UK’s geostrategic interests to widen the Abraham Accords and to see them flourish. The Accords are designed to serve as the keystone of a new Middle East, stabilised and aligned with Western interests but with its security underpinned by a much smaller American military footprint. The UK’s access to the Arabian Gulf continues to rely on American power, and as America pivots away from the region towards Asia, it is essential that we help to advance a new regional order which is in line with our interests. The Abraham Accords is at the epicentre of the US and UK’s engagement with the new regional order. As a result, it is in both our interests to broaden and deepen the Accords.

It was the US’s interest in accessing the Gulf’s oil that led to the Carter Doctrine in 1980. This asserted that the US would defend its regional interests with military force and guaranteed the UK’s access to the region. However, this doctrine began to erode with President Obama’s “Pivot to Asia”, a strategic shift that was accompanied by the US’s withdrawal from Iraq followed by the Biden Administration’s withdrawal from Afghanistan. It has become increasingly clear, to allies and enemies alike, that the US no longer considers the Middle East to be a main priority of its foreign policy.⁶

As part of this shift, the US has also withdrawn hardware from the region. General (retired) Joseph Votel notes that troop numbers have been considerably reduced from 80–90,000 in 2016–2019. General Votel states that fighter squadrons and destroyers in the area have been withdrawn to other priorities, in particular the Indo-Pacific. There are fewer ships, airplanes and enabling capabilities such as intelligence support. All have been diverted from the region to other evolving priorities.⁷

⁵ David Rose, “Rishi Sunak praises Israel as a 'shining beacon of hope' and denounces claim it is an apartheid state”, *Jewish Chronicle*, 4 August, 2022 <https://www.thejc.com/news/politics/rishi-sunak-praises-israel-as-a-shining-beacon-of-hope-and-denounces-claim-it-is-an-apartheid-state-dw5qqst9>

⁶ The perceived US withdrawal from the region was a contributing factor to the United Arab Emirates (UAE) withdrawing from a US-led maritime coalition on the Combined Maritime Forces on 31 May 2023, due to the US’s failure to respond to Iranian security threats after the seizure of two tankers in the strait of Hormuz. The UAE deemed the US as “consistently” failing to function as regional security guarantor, which has led allies to diversify their security partnerships. See Arwa Ibrahim, “UAE withdraws from US-led maritime coalition”, *Al Jazeera*, 31 May 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/5/31/uae-withdraws-from-us-led-maritime-coalition>

⁷ This created impression can backfire on the US as its regional allies are pushed into China’s sphere of influence which threatens the Abraham Accords. To curb China’s presence in the region and to prevent it from acquiring US technologies, the Abraham Accords was threatened. This is as the Biden Administration demanded that the UAE cancel a 5G communication network deal with Huawei while freezing the sales to the UAE of F-35 fighters, precision-strike weapons and MQ-9B UAVs. General (ret.) Joseph Votel, former Commander of US Central Command (CENTCOM), identified that the US’s commitment to provide Israel with a qualitative military edge was a thorn in the side of the UAE who could not appreciate why, as allies of the US, they could not gain similar capabilities. The US has been reluctant to share and propagate drone technology due to concerns on how it would be used. This has driven partners including Saudi Arabia and the UAE to operate Chinese and Russian systems that cannot be integrated with Western equipment. In turn, the US is

This shift of American strategic attention and military resources away from the Gulf, and the US's limited military response to Iran's threatening actions across the region, risks destabilising the area. This is causing local powers to seek new sources of security with US competitors that have entered the vacuum, including Russia and China, potentially cutting out other Western powers, including the UK. The UK cannot solely depend on the US's security umbrella in the region as the US has sought to pivot towards Asia, despite getting sucked back into the Middle East. As a result, the UK must consider an increased military presence to ensure stability.

To offset the risk of GCC states hedging with Russia and China, the US has adopted a strategic policy of 'Vietnamization'⁸ through the Abraham Accords which were signed on 15 September 2020. The Abraham Accords seek to bind Israel and the UAE, Bahrain, Sudan and Morocco in a new emerging economic landscape and NATO-styled security architecture whereby the US commits to coming to Saudi Arabia's assistance if attacked. This spurred on the likelihood of the Saudi Kingdom's normalisation with Israel with the prospect that Saudi Arabia could serve as a linchpin of the region's emerging security architecture. As a result, the Abraham Accords anchors US strategic interests in the region while reducing the space for Iranian, Chinese and Russian military penetration in the Gulf and broader Middle East. In turn, the Abraham Accords enable the US to pivot towards Asia. Yet it is too early for the US to fully turn its attention away from the region and rely upon Vietnamization as the US's presence is required for Vietnamization to work, by overcoming distrust among GCC states and so helping lead to greater integration of their security systems.

This trend has temporarily reversed due to Iran's activation of its regional proxies: Hamas on 7 October 2023 and subsequently Hezbollah and the Houthis. However, General Votel believes the US is not planning a fundamental shift of strategy, and still intends to recommit its military resources elsewhere once the crisis has passed.⁹

Indeed, to the extent that Israel's military campaign succeeds in dismantling Hamas and potentially Hezbollah, this will weaken Iran's ability to threaten and disrupt the peace process, giving America more room to step back, and enhancing the prospect of normalisation of relations between Israel and Saudi Arabia.¹⁰ By heightening regional insecurity, Iran has sought to create a wedge between Israel and its new GCC partners over the uncertain status of the Palestinian Territories. That remains a potential stumbling block.

Yet more fundamentally, despite the conflict in Gaza, Saudi Arabia remains eager to normalise relations with Israel as it seeks a strategic alliance with the US. According to Major General (Res) Amos Gilead, the moment that such an alliance is ratified via a two-thirds majority US

concerned that regional partners such as the UAE and Turkey will purchase Russian air defence systems. Saudi Arabia has threatened to do this. Between 2016 and 2019, the US reluctance to sell systems created a void that would be filled by Russia and China. Interview with General (ret.) Joseph Votel, former Commander of US Central Command (CENTCOM), December 2023.

⁸ Historical analogy for the US forces outsourcing to the South Vietnamese army to conduct combat with US assistance.

⁹ Interview with General (ret.) Joseph Votel, December 2023.

¹⁰ Interview with Maj. Gen. (Res) Amos Gilead, former Director of Policy and Political-Military Affairs at Israel's Ministry of Defence, December 2023.

Senate vote, Saudi normalisation with Israel will be effectively guaranteed, whatever the regional challenges.¹¹

¹¹ Ibid.

Refocusing the UK's Strategy Towards the Arabian Gulf

The UK has strong diplomatic ties across the Gulf, along with growing trade links and the presence of significant military assets in the region. These factors, alongside our close alliance with the United States, mean that Britain is well-placed to support the Abraham Accords, and assist the US policy of Vietnamization. However, the UK has not clearly delineated its strategy towards the Arabian Gulf and is at risk of missing this urgent opportunity. In order to protect our strategic interests, and play a significant role in unfreezing the Abraham Accords, Britain needs to refocus its strategic goals in the region.

British forces are already deployed on missions designed to reinforce regional and trade security in the Gulf, including Operation Kipion (see later), and have shown their capability in the recent US–UK strikes against Houthi rebels. Yet our official strategic posture appears confused. The UK maintains a regional military presence to ensure stability and the protection of trade routes, yet like the US, it does not identify the Gulf as a strategic priority. This has led both the US and UK to conduct a reactive foreign policy, especially with regards to Houthi attacks on merchant vessels in the Red Sea and broader attacks by Iranian proxies on US servicemen. It is curious that while the UK is seeking an FTA with GCC countries, it is seeking to shift its geopolitical and military attention towards the Indo-Pacific.

The 2021 Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy on one hand emphasised tilting towards the Indo-Pacific while also stating that “The Royal Navy’s Maritime Component Command in Bahrain will continue to ensure the flow of trade in the Gulf, including through support to part of the new International Maritime Security Construct.”¹²

Lucas Blasco Argullos has identified that the 2021 Integrated Review does not expound upon how the UK intends to allocate assets to both theatres and to what end. Yet Iran’s disruptive role across the region is now leading the UK to have to prioritise this theatre alongside the Indo-Pacific. Furthermore, the US and UK will not be able to distinguish between both theatres due to the increasing Chinese assertiveness in the East and South China Seas as well as China’s and Iran’s increased naval presence in the Middle East. China’s Middle East presence complements its contributions to the infrastructure development and digital economies of GCC states (see later).

The 2021 Integrated Review did emphasise the UK’s bid to sign an FTA with GCC countries and, as a result, states that “we will have thriving relationships in the Middle East and the Gulf based on trade, green innovation and science and technology collaboration, in support of a more resilient region that is increasingly self-reliant in providing for its own security.”¹³ The self-reliance described by the 2021 Integrated Review fits in with the strategic direction of the Abraham Accords. Baaz Chandwan notes that it is less clear how the UK plans to combine

¹² HM Government, *Global Britain in a competitive age: The Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy* (London: HM Government, 2021), https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/60644e4bd3bf7f0c91eababd/Global_Britain_in_a_Competitive_Age_the_Integrated_Review_of_Security_Defence_Development_and_Foreign_Policy.pdf

¹³ *Global Britain in a competitive age*.

its own shift to the Indo-Pacific while also fulfilling its responsibilities to maritime security and maintaining regional order.

It appears that the UK is decoupling military and security interests from its trade interests as it seeks to deepen its economic engagement in the Middle East while not increasing the security guarantees of the trade routes that could underpin this. As such, the 2023 Integrated Review Refresh barely mentions security threats and threats to trade routes in the Gulf region or in the Middle East more widely. It does however broadly advocate that US allies, including the UK, “need to step up our collective contribution to burden-sharing both in the Euro-Atlantic and across geopolitical hotspots including the Gulf and Indo-Pacific, as the UK is doing through IR2023.”¹⁴ It does not specify what these contributions should be and for what end. Similarly, when advancing “the importance of the UK’s partnerships with the Gulf states and Israel, as key regional and broader geopolitical actors,”¹⁵ it does not specify what these partnerships entail, and how the UK plans to contribute towards them. This is congruent with the National Strategy for Maritime Security which, while mentioning the Gulf region and the need to uphold freedom of navigation, fails to provide much detail on the exact risks that maritime trade routes face, and how the UK could counter them.

Similarly, the British Army’s Future Soldier Strategy, published in 2021, aims to enhance the British Army’s warfighting abilities to contend with the challenges of the 21st century.¹⁶ The Future Soldier Strategy vaguely advocates “persistent forward deployment” and refers to being “persistently engaged across the globe” to deter adversaries and demonstrate commitment to allies. However, it does not specify how this would occur in the Arabian Gulf. While the increasing assertiveness of China both in the East and South China Seas merits the UK’s focus on the region, it is essential for the UK to increase its military presence to protect trade routes with the GCC which is in a geopolitically unstable area – as recent Houthi attacks in the Red Sea have demonstrated.

Overall, the defence and security frameworks created as part of the UK’s bilateral relations with GCC states have been marred by the lack of a “coherent strategic framework”.¹⁷ Some defence and security frameworks, like the Strategic Partnership Council established in 2018 with to foster collaboration between the UK and Saudi Arabia include an “economic and social” pillar as well as a “political and security” pillar¹⁸ have likewise not been adequately

¹⁴ “Integrated Review Refresh 2023: Responding to a more contested and volatile world”, gov.uk, 16 May 2023, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/integrated-review-refresh-2023-responding-to-a-more-contested-and-volatile-world/integrated-review-refresh-2023-responding-to-a-more-contested-and-volatile-world>

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ “Future Soldier Guide”, British Army, 25 November 2021, https://www.army.mod.uk/media/15057/adr010310-futuresoldierguide_30nov.pdf

¹⁷ Tobias Borck, “Shifting Sands: The UK’s Role in a Changing Gulf”, Royal United Services Institute, 24 March 2023, <https://rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/shifting-sands-uks-role-changing-gulf>

¹⁸ “United Kingdom and Kingdom of Saudi Arabia Strategic Partnership Council: Economic and Social Pillar – joint statement”, Department for Energy Security and Net Zero, 7 June 2023, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/united-kingdom-and-kingdom-of-saudi-arabia-strategic-partnership-council-economic-and-social-pillar-joint-statement/united-kingdom-and-kingdom-of-saudi-arabia-strategic-partnership-council-economic-and-social-pillar-joint-statement-7-june-2023>

developed. The protection of trade routes occurs in a reactive manner at an operational level, but this is not sufficiently reflected at a doctrinal level.

Rear Admiral Chris Parry has asserted that this reflects a broader phenomenon of the UK lacking a global strategy that reflects its foreign investments, economic footprint and security interests.¹⁹

This lack of doctrinal clarity may also be a product of the UK's unwillingness to increase its defence expenditure. The UK currently spends a "bare minimum" of 2% of GDP on defence, and no timeline has been set for the long-term commitment to increase this to 2.5%.²⁰

Moreover, the Royal Navy is decommissioning two warships, the *HMS Westminster* and the *HMS Argyll*. This will reduce the number of frigates in the UK's surface fleet to nine.²¹ These cuts will prevent the UK from more effectively projecting its power in the region and protecting cargo in the Middle East. To effectively project power in the Gulf, the UK needs more frigates and destroyers. It would require an irreducible force minimum (frigates and air defence destroyers) of 30 or 32. Currently it has 18.²² The UK Ministry of Defence has ordered eight Type 26 frigates but the first of these, *HMS Glasgow*, will not be operational until 2028 at the earliest, followed by *HMS Cardiff*, which is expected by 2030. Lord West, the former first sea lord, expressed his concern earlier this year: "With the number [of warships] we've got, if we get involved in any action, we are really poorly placed. If the Government had taken seriously the issue of frigate numbers over the last 10 years, there would be sufficient to meet the requirements of trade protection in the Red Sea."²³

Carlos Del Toro, the US Navy Secretary, has joined in criticising Britain's defence policy in light of the ongoing conflict in the Middle East as well as the threats emanating from Russia, stating: "I think it's important for the United Kingdom to reassess where they are today, given the threats that exist today." He furthermore expressed that Britain should make a "decision around whether the army needs to be strengthened."²⁴

¹⁹ Interview with Rear Admiral Chris Parry CBE, January 2024.

²⁰ "UK Government only committed to 'bare minimum' of required defence spending, Committee says", UK Parliament, Committees, 22 June 2023, <https://committees.parliament.uk/committee/24/defence-committee/news/195939/uk-government-only-committed-to-bare-minimum-of-required-defence-spending-committee-says/>

²¹ Danielle Sheridan, "Navy has so few sailors it has to decommission ships", *Daily Telegraph*, 4 January 2024, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2024/01/04/royal-navy-few-sailors-decommission-ships-new-frigates/>

²² Interview with Professor Michael Clarke, former Director-General of the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI), Specialist Advisor to the British Joint Committee on National Security Strategy and Specialist Advisor to the House of Commons Defence Committee, January 2024.

²³ Sheridan, "Navy has so few sailors it has to decommission ships".

²⁴ Tony Diver, "Britain should boost troops to counter Russia threats, suggests Biden official", *Daily Telegraph*, 25 January 2024, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/world-news/2024/01/25/britain-should-boost-troops-biden-official/>

I. Unfreezing the Abraham Accords Through Greater Military Integration

Increasing UK–US Interoperability

The first step toward a more coherent UK military strategy for the Gulf would be to bring forward the proposed increase in military spending to 2.5% of GDP, or otherwise find savings to deliver more with less through improvements to procurement and productivity. Increasing military expenditure will increase the prospect of the UK's military achieving greater interoperability with the US's more advanced military platforms, which in turn can enhance regional security and economic collaboration and deepen the Abraham Accords. *HMS Bulwark* and *HMS Albion* are landing support ships that are like mini aircraft carriers that integrate well with US forces. British aircraft carriers can also integrate with the F35Bs that are used by the US Marine Corps.²⁵ Yet broader interoperability between US and UK assets can only take place within a regional security and economic architecture created by the US that is supported by the UK and of which the Abraham Accords is a cornerstone. Deepening military collaboration with the US should also prompt the UK to adopt a more coherent regional strategy and a more robust force posture in the Arabian Gulf.

Currently, the UK deploys its naval assets to protect shipping lanes and uphold the freedom of navigation by contending with Serious and Organised Crime (SOC), drug smuggling, piracy, terrorism and other security threats. As the UK aims for trade barriers to be lowered in GCC countries, in turn, Gulf countries may demand security guarantees, and receive foreign policy support.

Examples of the potential for collaboration already exist. An example of close UK–US collaboration includes the International Maritime Exercise (IMX) which took place in March 2023²⁶ and saw the Royal Navy involved in “the second largest naval exercise in the world” across the Middle East, tackling threats ranging from terrorism to sea mines.²⁷ The IMX occurs biennially and is geared to integrate the UK into US forces.²⁸

The IMX serves as a basis for Operation Prosperity Guardian which was announced by the US on 18 December 2023²⁹ to serve as a maritime protection force in the Southern Red Sea following drone and rocket attacks launched by Houthis at merchant vessels as well as UK and US warships in the Southern Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden; these attacks have severely

²⁵ Interview with Professor Michael Clarke, November 2023.

²⁶ “Royal Navy’s Gulf forces complete world’s second-largest maritime exercise”, Royal Navy, 20 March 2023, <https://www.royalnavy.mod.uk/news-and-latest-activity/news/2023/march/20/20230320-royal-navys-gulf-forces-complete-worlds-second-largest-maritime-exercise>

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ “60 Nations, International Organizations Kick Off Largest Maritime Exercise in Middle East”, U.S. Navy, 31 January 2022, <https://www.navy.mil/Press-Office/News-Stories/Article/2917383/60-nations-international-organizations-kick-off-largest-maritime-exercise-in-mi/>

²⁹ Dan Sabbagh, “US announces naval coalition to defend Red Sea shipping from Houthi attacks”, *The Guardian*, 19 December 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2023/dec/19/us-announces-naval-coalition-to-defend-red-sea-shipping-from-houthi-attacks>

disrupted international shipping. Following the announcement of Operation Prosperity Guardian, British Defence Secretary Grant Shapps stated that the Royal Navy's Type 45 Destroyer *HMS Diamond* would be made available for this mission.³⁰

Furthermore, the US and UK have been participating in a series of bilateral cooperative measures aimed at increasing interoperability and mine countermeasure drills. Neptune's Kilt, conducted in July 2023, was aimed at collective "mine hunting" for UK and US forces.³¹ The UK supplied three of the total four ships (*HMS Middleton*, *HMS Bangor* and *RFA Cardigan Bay*) whilst the US supplied *USS Paul Hamilton*. The US also supplied four A-10 Thunderbolt II aircraft and two MH-53E Sea Dragon helicopters.³²

Similarly, the UK, France and US conducted Operation Artemis Trident in 2023 which takes place every two years and seeks to enhance interoperability on mine countermeasure operations.³³

Judging by the frequency and aims of such collaborations, it seems clear that integration and interoperability between the UK and the US plays a valuable role in countering regional instability posed by Iran and its proxies. With Iran increasing the threat to Israel and to shipping, and the US looking to reduce its military presence in the region, it is in Britain's interests to increase its military spending in order to deepen its ability to work effectively alongside US forces and supplement their efforts.

³⁰ "HMS Diamond joins new international task force to protect shipping in the Red Sea", UK Ministry of Defence, 19 December 2023, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/hms-diamond-joins-new-international-task-force-to-protect-shipping-in-the-red-sea>

³¹ "UK, U.S. Forces Complete Large-Scale Mine Countermeasures Exercise in Arabian Gulf", U.S. Central Command, 2 July 2023, <https://www.centcom.mil/MEDIA/NEWS-ARTICLES/News-Article-View/Article/3448706/uk-us-forces-complete-large-scale-mine-countermeasures-exercise-in-arabian-gulf/>

³² Ibid.

³³ "US France And UK Complete Artemis Trident MCM Exercise In Gulf", *Naval News Press Release*, 18 April 2023 <https://www.navalnews.com/naval-news/2023/04/us-france-and-uk-complete-artemis-trident-mcm-exercise-in-gulf/#:~:text=On%20April%2013%2C%202023%2C%20forces,which%20concentrated%20on%20mine%20countermeasures.>

Increasing the UK's Contribution to GCC Military Integration

Currently the UK does not have the capabilities or footprint to independently project power effectively in the Gulf³⁴ and, as a result, lacks the capacity and credibility to offer independent security guarantees to GCC states.³⁵ Despite this, the presence of the UK's military assets and a well-trained joint force across the Arabian Gulf is invaluable to foster collaboration among regional allies which serves to deepen and broaden the Abraham Accords to include other GCC states. The UK can work through its allies in the region and move assets to contribute to a stronger allied force. Britain's aircraft carrier can operate out of a semi-permanent base in Bahrain which gives the UK leverage with Bahrain, Qatar, UAE and Oman. The UK can also contribute towards a larger naval and marine presence in the Gulf. Saudi Arabia and Qatar operate British Typhoons and the UK maintains a joint British–Qatar squadron (12 Squadron) where the UK trains its respective forces on the Typhoons. If that proves successful, the UK can create more joint squadrons across the Gulf to include other GCC states such as the UAE.³⁶

The UK can also tap into its positive political relations with a variety of countries across the Middle East which at times is stronger than the US's relations with them. This can enable the UK to assist the US to overcome any hurdles of interoperability among GCC states' defence systems.³⁷ Again, this will require the UK to increase its military expenditure and expand its presence to complement the US's security architecture in the region and contribute to reinvigorating the Abraham Accords.³⁸ The ties that already exist demonstrate the potential for the UK to build on and deepen these relationships.

a) Saudi Arabia

An example of the UK military's attempts to effectively foster increased integration of GCC assets and directly enhance GCC forces' capabilities via increased joint training and exercises is the UK's military cooperation with Saudi Arabia on Exercise Nautical Defender.³⁹ This has led Saudi Arabia to undertake its second Naval Expansion Programme in an effort to compete with the capabilities of the Iranian Navy.⁴⁰ This expansion may aid CENTCOM missions to ensure the passage of free trade within the region as Saudi Arabia has now taken control of the collective International Maritime Security fleet and continues to emphasise that it has a large

³⁴ Interview with Rear Admiral Chris Parry CBE, January 2024.

³⁵ Interview with Professor Michael Clarke, November 2023.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Interview with General (ret.) Joseph Votel, December 2023.

³⁸ Interview with Asher Fredman, Director for Israel/Abraham Accords Peace Institute, November 2023.

³⁹ "U.S., UK and Saudi Arabia Complete Naval Exercise in Arabian Gulf", U.S. Navy, 8 November 2022, <https://www.navy.mil/Press-Office/News-Stories/Article/3212584/us-uk-and-saudi-arabia-complete-naval-exercise-in-arabian-gulf/>

⁴⁰ Agnes Helou, "Saudi naval modernization pushes ahead, with eye always on Iran", *Breaking Defense*, 9 September 2022, <https://breakingdefense.com/2022/09/saudi-naval-modernization-pushes-ahead-with-eye-always-on-iran/>

role to play within the region.⁴¹ The UK is also actively seeking to integrate Saudi Arabia into its next-generation fighter initiative, GCAP, alongside Japan and Italy.⁴²

b) Oman

Britain is building up her defence assets in Oman and has established a regional land hub in the country⁴³ which has the strategic value of being situated further away from the naval chokepoint of the Strait of Hormuz and not being completely immersed within the Gulf.⁴⁴ The UK has conducted joint military exercises such as the Saif Sareea exercises which have increased air and ground integration between British armed forces and the Omani army. Saif Sareea 4 will occur in 2028.⁴⁵

The UK's relations with Oman enabled it to launch Operation Kipion from Oman's Duqm port, which hosts British aircraft carriers. Operation Kipion was established in 2011 and seeks to maintain regional security; it is led by the UK Maritime Component Command (UKMCC), which has its headquarters in Bahrain, and commits Britain to a permanent naval presence within the Gulf. The UKMCC seeks to achieve this by deploying both an escort ship, such as the Type 23 Frigate *HMS Lancaster*, and a Royal Fleet Auxiliary tanker, such as the *RFA Cardigan Bay*, to protect and escort merchant vessels as well as tankers.

As part of Operation Kipion, in late January and February 2022, *HMS Montrose* seized Iranian weapons being smuggled in waters south of Iran which were most likely being shipped to Houthi rebels in Yemen. In February 2023, a similar scenario occurred where Iranian anti-tank guided missiles and medium-range ballistic missile components were seized by *HMS Lancaster* from smugglers south of Iran. Due to increasing tensions in the region following the 7 October attacks in Israel by Hamas, the UK announced in late November that it would be sending *HMS Diamond*, a Type 45 Destroyer, to aid Operation Kipion missions within the region. This enabled the UK to shoot down a Houthi drone on 16 December 2023.⁴⁶

c) Bahrain

Similar to the UK's relations with Oman, it maintains a naval base at Mina Salman in Bahrain where *HMS Lancaster* is deployed to boost maritime security in the region due to its proximity to the Straits of Hormuz. In July 2019, after Iranian commandos seized control of a British oil

⁴¹ Leonardo Jacopo Maria Mazzucco, "Saudi Navy Assumes New Leadership Role in US-led Maritime Coalitions", *Stimson*, 26 October 2023, <https://www.stimson.org/2023/saudi-navy-assumes-new-leadership-role-in-us-led-maritime-coalitions/>

⁴² Patrick Daly, "Shapps holds door open to Saudi Arabia joining stealth fighter jet alliance", *Independent*, 14 December 2023, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/saudi-arabia-italy-japan-mohammed-bin-salman-defence-secretary-b2464250.html>

⁴³ "Future Soldier Guide".

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ministry of Defence, Joint message from The Rt Hon Ben Wallace MP Secretary of State for Defence and General Sir Nick Carter Chief of Defence Staff, <https://firstforum.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/P1315-MoD-and-CotDS-message.pdf>

⁴⁶ "HMS Diamond joins new international task force to protect shipping in the Red Sea", UK Ministry of Defence, 19 December 2023, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/hms-diamond-joins-new-international-task-force-to-protect-shipping-in-the-red-sea>

tanker,⁴⁷ the Royal Navy, operating from the Mina Salman Port, was able to protect 90 ships passing through the Strait of Hormuz.⁴⁸

d) Qatar

In Qatar, the RAF maintains the Al Udeid base which serves as its operational headquarters and hosts the 83 Expeditionary Air Group which maintains control of different Expeditionary air wings operating throughout the Middle East.⁴⁹ The 83 Expeditionary Air Group supports missions under Operation Kipion and also Operation Shader, which has effectively contributed to strikes against ISIS militants.⁵⁰ Professor Michael Clarke considers that, although not clearly stated, it is most likely aiding missions such as seizing illegal arms transfers within the Gulf to groups such as Yemen's Houthis.⁵¹

e) UAE

The RAF uses the Al Minihad airbase within the UAE where the 906 Expeditionary Air Wing is deployed⁵² which is now used to conduct joint RAF air operations within that area.⁵³ The RAF contributed to the UAE's Advanced Tactical Leadership Course in November 2022, which also included France and the US, with the aim of increasing integration, interoperability and joint planning between partner states and which may also aid in deterring regional belligerence.

The Bahrain-based International Maritime Security Construct, which was established in 2019 to protect and ensure the safe passage of merchant shipping throughout the region, particularly through the Straits of Hormuz,⁵⁴ conducts exercises between coalition members. Exercises include Sentinel Shield which aims to integrate AI and unmanned systems into naval force readiness.⁵⁵ Similarly, in October 2022, the US and UK conducted Exercise Phantom Scope, aimed at integrating AI capabilities into the US Navy and unmanned systems to enhance maritime monitoring processes.⁵⁶ Exercise Phantom Scope included the Royal Navy

⁴⁷ Andrew MacAskill and Jonathan Saul, "Britain begins escorting all UK vessels through Hormuz Strait", Reuters, 25 July 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-iran-britain-idUSKCN1UK1HI/>

⁴⁸ "Royal Navy safeguards nearly 90 ships through Strait of Hormuz in two months", Royal Navy, 2 September 2019, <https://www.royalnavy.mod.uk/news-and-latest-activity/news/2019/september/02/190902-montrose-in-the-gulf>

⁴⁹ Louisa Brooke-Holland, "UK forces in the Middle East region", House of Commons Library, 14 January 2020, <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-8794/>

⁵⁰ "Foreign Secretary briefed on Operation Shader during visit to RAF's Middle East headquarters", Forces Network, 23 November 2022, <https://www.forces.net/raf/foreign-secretary-briefed-operation-shader-during-visit-rafs-middle-east-headquarters#:~:text=Mr%20Cleverly%20was%20briefed%20by,by%20the%20Expeditionary%20Air%20Wing>

⁵¹ Interview with Professor Michael Clarke, January 2024.

⁵² "New RAF unit strengthens relationship with United Arab Emirates", UK Ministry of Defence, 23 January 2013, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/906-expeditionary-air-wing-stands-up-in-the-united-arab-emirates>

⁵³ Ibid. See also "RAF Air Command: RAF Expeditionary and Logistic Units", Armed Forces, <http://www.armedforces.co.uk/raf/listings/I0049.html>

⁵⁴ "Home", International Maritime Security Construct, <https://www.imscsentinel.com/>

⁵⁵ "IMSC Task Force Completes Maritime Exercise with Unmanned Systems, A.I.", Defense Visual Information Distribution Services, 9 January 2023, <https://www.dvidshub.net/news/436441/imsc-task-force-completes-maritime-exercise-with-unmanned-systems-ai>

⁵⁶ "U.S., UK Navies Conduct Unmanned Exercise in Arabian Gulf", U.S. Navy, 7 October 2022, <https://www.navy.mil/Press-Office/News-Stories/Article/3183025/us-uk-navies-conduct-unmanned-exercise-in-arabian-gulf/>

and the US 5th fleet's Task Force 59 off the coast of Bahrain. This led in November 2022 to the US, UK and Saudi Arabia cooperating on Exercise Nautical Defender within the Arabian Gulf,⁵⁷ focusing on cooperative drills involving mine clearances and vessel boarding coordination as well as maritime defence and security.⁵⁸

Both the recent Houthi attacks in the Red Sea, and the challenges US and UK forces have experienced in bringing them to an end, demonstrate the current elevated risk to shipping and the need for greater resources to maintain maritime security. Furthermore, US military bases and personnel are likely to continue to be targeted due to Iran unleashing its proxies across the entire region. An increase in defence expenditure is essential if the UK's military is to increase its ability to conduct joint exercises with Gulf states more regularly and, in the process, to promote military integration in the region.

⁵⁷ "US, UK and Saudi navies conclude exercise Nautical Defender 22", *Naval Technology*, 9 November 2022, <https://www.naval-technology.com/news/us-uk-saudi-nautical-defender22/?cf-view>

⁵⁸ Alie Peter Neil Galeon, "US, UK, Saudi Arabia Complete Naval Drill in Arabian Gulf", *The Defense Post*, 9 November 2022, https://www.thedefensepost.com/2022/11/09/us-uk-saudi-arabia-naval-exercise/?expand_article=1

Increasing Interoperability Among Abraham Accord Signatories

Bilateral cooperation between the UK and US or Israel and the US can also foster broader multilateral cooperation between GCC states and Israel. In the past few years, joint US–Israel drills such as Noble Roads in the Red Sea have led to a crossover from bilateral to multilateral drills. This includes greater streamlining of operations amongst forces, greater openness of intelligence sharing, growing military procurement and increasing trilateral meetings between military leaders.

In turn, this can enhance the military cooperation and interoperability of regional allies with the US and UK forces. Joint training and military exercises can thus serve as the basis to integrate additional GCC countries in areas such as maritime security or air defence. However, there is much further to go.

The Abraham Accords is the bedrock for the region’s emerging security architecture, which is developing organically via defence initiatives pursued by a few nations at a time, while serving as a basis for a new defence architecture that can deter Iran.⁵⁹ This regional strategic cooperation initiative involves sharing radar information and integrating layered missile defence systems. Combined exercises in air, land and maritime domains between Israel and Bahrain, or Israel and the UAE with US involvement are increasingly occurring.⁶⁰ An example of this is the Middle East Air Defense Alliance (MEAD)⁶¹ which is spearheaded by the Biden Administration.⁶² Intended to include Israel, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, UAE, Bahrain, Jordan and Egypt, it is aimed at countering Iranian missiles and drones. Former Israeli Minister of Defence Benny Gantz said that MEAD has thwarted attempts by Iran to target the region.⁶³

It is critical for the US with its sophisticated military platforms to serve as a central node for states to increase their willingness to share information.⁶⁴ This could enable GCC members to agree in principle to the shared objectives of enhancing collective early warning, coordinating

⁵⁹ Interview with General (ret.) Joseph Votel, December 2023.

⁶⁰ Joint exercises such as Israel participating alongside Saudi Arabia and Oman in the biennial International Maritime Exercise 2022 is an important foundation to build trust and confidence, enabling unit-to-unit exchanges to take place between different organisations. They also offer opportunities for technological transfer between partnering nations. Similarly, the Bright Star activities that began in the 1980s in the Reagan Administration were important to build relations that were leveraged upon in Desert Storm. Interview with General (ret.) Joseph Votel, December 2023.

⁶¹ Interview with Yonah J. Bob, co-author of *Target Tehran: How Israel is Using Sabotage, Cyberwarfare, Assassination and Secret Diplomacy – to Stop a Nuclear Iran and Create a New Middle East* (Simon & Schuster, 2023), in January 2024.

⁶² MEAD was never formalised into a public facing institutional body. Interview with Asher Fredman, November 2023.

⁶³ Cited in Bob and Evyatar, *Target Tehran*, p. 242.

⁶⁴ US Lt Gen. and CENTCOM Air Force (AFCENT) Chief Alexis Grynkeiwich noted that “some” would be reluctant to share information “if the US was not in the middle”. As a result, the US is “a very useful place for information to come together.” AFDENT can fuse information via a digital connection, enabling real-time sharing of information from “IP-based systems, which are not datalinks ... on a secret computer system” which enables communication to “remain flat and faster”. This “enables nations to provide mutual defense of each other, if they have that understanding that they will defend each other in response to that threat.” Yonah J. Bob, “US has military options for Iran’s nuclear threat, CENTCOM air force chief tells ‘Post’”, *The Jerusalem Post*, 7 July 2023, <https://www.jpost.com/israel-news/article-749167>

more effectively against shared threats, and advancing a more regionally networked air and missile defence architecture through US Central Command.⁶⁵

Despite this, the US has not managed to establish joint air defence integration with GCC states that could underpin the US's security architecture in the Middle East to prevent missile and drone attacks.⁶⁶ There has been a reluctance among GCC states to share information due to a lack of trust.⁶⁷ Most are focused on defending themselves, rather than having their systems used to defend another, preventing mutual defence from protecting the Gulf.⁶⁸ This has contributed to GCC states lacking the capacity to integrate firepower effectively⁶⁹ even though numerous GCC countries have US air defence systems.⁷⁰

Another reason for the slow progression in regional cooperation on air defence and missile defence is due to the region's historic reliance on the US and other Western nations.⁷¹ At times, structural changes may contribute to spurring on interoperability between Israel and GCC states. Israel's recent move from being a part of European Command to US Central Command (CENTCOM) has enabled Israel and GCC states to better identify and coordinate to counter aerial and missile threats. As a result, in the current conflict between Israel and Hamas, along with Houthi missile attacks, there were a few instances where MEAD contributed to intelligence and missile defence cooperation between Israel and GCC states, leading to the successful interception of Houthi missiles fired at Israel.⁷² Similarly, Saudi oil fields are more secure as its air and missile defence cooperation with Israel has increased Saudi Arabia's capabilities to interdict Houthi missiles.⁷³

Maritime integration has been more successful due to the degree of interoperability that already exists between UK and US forces which in turn can spill over to increased cooperation

⁶⁵ Lt Col Phil Ventura, "Readout of the New Round of U.S.–Gulf Cooperation Council Working Groups on Integrated Air and Missile Defense and Maritime Security", U.S. Department of Defense, 14 February 2023, <https://www.defense.gov/News/Releases/Release/Article/3298553/readout-of-the-new-round-of-us-gulf-cooperation-council-working-groups-on-integ/>

⁶⁶ Ashley Roque, "US-Gulf Cooperation Council eyeing path ahead on integrated air defense", *Breaking Defense*, 17 February 2023, <https://breakingdefense.com/2023/02/us-gulf-cooperation-council-eyeing-path-ahead-on-integrated-air-defense/>

⁶⁷ Interview with Dr Uzi Rubin, founder and Director of Israel Missile Defense Organization in Israel's Ministry of Defence, November 2023.

⁶⁸ Interview with General (ret.) Joseph Votel, December 2023.

⁶⁹ Interview with Rear Admiral Chris Parry CBE, January 2024.

⁷⁰ GCC States use US defence systems such as the Patriot and the Terminal High Altitude Air Defence system (THAAD), the Abrams tank system as well as upgraded F-15s and F-16s.

⁷¹ General (ret.) Joseph Votel also noted that US air and missile defence technologies are considered more sophisticated and are seen as unachievable and too expensive for its regional allies to pursue. Even with regards to technological refresh to upgrade technologies for US jets, rich countries such as Saudi Arabia or the UAE have found it challenging to advance at an appropriate rate. This has led to reliance on the US which has also created tech gaps between regional states in the Gulf. US bureaucracy has swiftly enabled generations of tech to emerge, creating more technological gaps with Arab countries as well as Western countries. An additional reason General (ret.) Joseph Votel offers for the technological gaps that hinder interoperability between GCC states is that between 2001 and 2019, the US had a large number of troops in the region, creating a situation where it had a large number of resources and could take care of problems alone, without the support or integration of regional partners. Interview with General (ret.) Joseph Votel, December 2023.

⁷² Interview with Yonah J. Bob, January 2024.

⁷³ Ibid.

by GCC states to integrate their systems. The *Prince of Wales* and *Queen Elizabeth* aircraft carriers are interoperable with US carriers. The UK runs F-35B Lightning aircraft and trains with the US whose aircraft land on these UK aircraft carriers.⁷⁴ CENTCOM has created innovation task forces, including Task Force 59, which addresses maritime security and focuses on developing sensors, automation and AI in the Arabian Gulf. Task Force 59 builds up trust and confidence among GCC partners from the ground up that can be developed further.⁷⁵

⁷⁴ Interview with Professor Michael Clarke, November 2023. Similarly, in the realm of cybersecurity, the UK via Government Communications Headquarters (GCHQ) works closely with the US's National Security Agency.

⁷⁵ General (ret.) Joseph Votel notes that Task Force 59 explores how it can position a variety of sensors, including commercial sensors, across the Gulf through the use of autonomous systems that are largely procured by partners who embed them into a network that is sentient, detecting, reporting and classifying. They will eventually have the ability to move resources to take a look or direct other manned resources to take action. Because this approach was ground up, General Michael Kurilla, Commander, US CENTCOM, leveraged partners to acquire their own robotics systems and autonomous systems that are pulled together as part of the Digital Gulf that provides greater situational awareness of what is going on. Interview with General (ret.) Joseph Votel, December 2023.

Regional Defence Procurement and Opportunities for Integration

Increased sales of military equipment among Abraham Accords signatories could feed into more joint exercises led by the US and UK. As the sale of military equipment fosters greater interoperability among Abraham Accords signatories, it also promotes their military integration into the US and UK's systems. The Biden Administration's recent consideration to refuse selling Israel certain weapons to slow its war against Hamas⁷⁶ could undermine the US's strategic objective of military integration in NATO-styled security architecture.

As the Abraham Accords promote economic interdependence within civilian markets, that interdependence fosters trust, which in turn encourages government cooperation and greater openness to defence contracts between Israel and Arab states, especially with a view to countering the shared regional threat from Iran. Examples include GCC states purchasing Israeli technologies such as unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) and low-flying aircraft that evade radar detection. Another example is the N7 Initiative⁷⁷ that seeks to broaden and deepen regional integration between Israel and Arab and Muslim countries. The N7 Initiative is laying infrastructure for civilian cooperation, but also paving the way for security cooperation.⁷⁸ In 2021, US\$853 million of Israel's \$11.4 billion arms exports (7%) was to the Arab world. By 2022, this Arab share had increased to 24%: US\$2.96 billion out of Israel's \$12.5 billion arms exports.⁷⁹

As part of the emerging security architecture in the region, Israel's sales of missile defence and anti-drone systems to GCC partners feeds into the US's bid to create a regional multi-layered air defence system by integrating the systems acquired by different states and, in turn, making them interoperable with US systems. There is already considerable interoperability, and the potential to expand this further, as trust builds between the regional parties.

⁷⁶ Carole E. Lee and Courtney Kube, "Biden administration discussing slowing some weaponry deliveries to Israel to pressure Netanyahu", NBC News, 28 January 2024, <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/white-house/biden-administration-discussing-slowing-weaponry-deliveries-israel-pre-rcna136035>

⁷⁷ The N7 Initiative is a partnership between the Atlantic Council and Jeffrey M. Talpins Foundation.

⁷⁸ <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/n7-initiative/>

⁷⁹ Rina Bassist, "Arab states make up 24% of Israel's 2022 arms exports including drones", Al-Monitor, 14 June 2023

<https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2023/06/arab-states-make-24-israels-2022-arms-exports-including-drones#ixzz8QtDDNTqc>

<https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2023/06/arab-states-make-24-israels-2022-arms-exports-including-drones#ixzz8ODsufV5R%22>

2023 numbers are yet to be released.

Such integration of weapons systems already includes:

- Israel's Iron Dome and David's Sling missile defence systems. Both systems have a unified connection that is centrally commanded and are interoperable with the US THAAD system that intercepts longer-range ballistic missiles.
- Due to the UAE's relatively cordial relations with Iran, Israel is reluctant to supply the Iron Dome to the UAE, as it could fall into Iranian hands.⁸⁰ Despite this, there are currently ongoing discussions between Israel and GCC states to sell the Iron Dome missile defence system.
- Israel, the UAE and Saudi Arabia all possess the MIM-104 Patriot missile system.
- The US possesses the Aegis combat system and has deployed it in the Red Sea – most recently intercepting Houthi drones that could have been directed at Israel. Saudi Arabia's Multi-Mission Surface Combatant (MMSC) ships can integrate with Aegis as they use Aegis Combat System Common Source Library, mirroring Aegis control systems and enabling anti-air and anti-surface capabilities in a small surface combatant platform.⁸¹ Furthermore, Israel and the US often conduct joint military exercises in which Aegis is a part.⁸²
- Israel has sold the UAE the Barak-8 air defence system, which is interoperable with Aegis⁸³ and which is stationed around Abu Dhabi.⁸⁴ There have been unconfirmed reports that Israel sold the UAE its Rafael-made SPYDER mobile interception system which is a short anti-aircraft system capable of engaging drones and precision-guided munitions. The SPYDER can adapt Python 5 air-to-air missiles to launch from the ground.⁸⁵
- Saudi Arabia and the UAE are purchasing anti-UAV and anti-short-range systems and have purchased the THAAD system.

⁸⁰ Similarly, Israel didn't send the Iron Dome to Ukraine as it was concerned it could fall into Russian hands who in turn would share it with Iran. Interview with Dr Uzi Rubin, November 2023.

⁸¹ Xavier Vasseur, "Lockheed Martin Started Construction On Saudi Arabia's 2nd MMSC", *Naval News*, 16 March 2021, <https://www.navalnews.com/naval-news/2021/03/lockheed-martin-started-construction-on-saudi-arabias-2nd-mmssc/>

⁸² Judah Ari Gross, "US, IDF troops train to protect Israel from ballistic missiles together", *The Times of Israel*, 8 March 2018, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/us-idf-troops-train-to-protect-israel-from-ballistic-missiles-together/>

⁸³ Arie Egozi, "First Israeli Barak air defense system deploys to UAE, bigger deals expected: Sources", *Breaking Defense*, 19 October 2022, <https://breakingdefense.com/2022/10/first-israeli-barak-air-defense-system-deploys-to-uae-bigger-deals-expected-sources/>

⁸⁴ Bob and Eyyatar, *Target Tehran*. p. 238.

⁸⁵ Interview with Dr Uzi Rubin, November 2023.

- The UAE has procured a shorter-range system from South Korea, KM-SAM, which can integrate with US and Israeli systems.⁸⁶ Saudi Arabia has placed joint Israeli radar systems on Saudi soil.⁸⁷
- Israel sold a US\$500 million missile defence system to Morocco⁸⁸ that included Barak MX systems,⁸⁹ Harop Kamikaze drones⁹⁰ and 150 eVTOL drones – the WanderB and the ThunderB.⁹¹ Morocco has increasingly made its systems compatible with Israeli systems.⁹²
- Israeli defence technology company Elbit Systems will open two production sites in Morocco.⁹³
- Morocco ordered 200 Merkava tanks and possibly also rocket launchers.⁹⁴
- In February 2022, Israel's former defence minister Benny Gantz signed a formal security agreement with his Bahraini counterpart, Abdullah Bin Hassan Al Nuaimi.
- Israel is providing Bahrain with anti-drone systems and Israel's intelligence services are training Bahraini intelligence officers.⁹⁵

Along with being beneficiaries of Israel's weapons sales, signatories of the Abraham Accords are studying the effectiveness of Israel's integrated approach to warfare in its conflict in Gaza and how the Israel Defence Forces (IDF) fosters interoperability between air force, naval, ground forces and tactical intelligence.⁹⁶ The prospect for collaboration among Abraham Accords partners may extend to the nuclear sphere as Israel's Atomic Energy Commission chief Moshe Edri said in his speech to the 66th General Conference of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) in Vienna that Israel may share aspects of its nuclear technology and knowledge with countries that are part of the Abraham Accords.⁹⁷

⁸⁶ As the KM-SAM is computerised, it could technically also be integrated into Russian systems.

⁸⁷ Bob and Evyatar, *Target Tehran*, p. 239.

⁸⁸ "Is Morocco Israel's next defence Eldorado?", defenceWeb, 14 August 2023,

<https://www.defenceweb.co.za/industry/industry-industry/is-morocco-israels-next-defence-eldorado/>

⁸⁹ Paul Iddon, "Morocco Procured Israeli And Turkish Weapons That Enabled Azerbaijan To Prevail Over Armenia", *Forbes*, 21 September 2023, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/pauliddon/2023/09/21/morocco-procured-israeli-and-turkish-weapons-that-enabled-azerbaijan-to-prevail-over-armenia/?sh=3e78c990130b>

⁹⁰ Rina Bassist, "Arab states make up 24% of Israel's 2022 arms exports including drones", *Al-Monitor*, 14 June 2023, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2023/06/arab-states-make-24-israels-2022-arms-exports-including-drones#ixzz8ODtCbgtN>

⁹¹ Arie Egozi, "Morocco buys advanced weapon systems from Israel, including UAVs for intelligence gathering", *Defense Procurement International*, 2 September 2022, <https://www.defenceprocurementinternational.com/news/air/morocco-buys-advanced-weapon-systems-from-israel>

⁹² "Is Morocco Israel's next defence Eldorado?"

⁹³ Bassist, "Arab states make up 24% of Israel's 2022 arms exports including drones"

⁹⁴ "Is Morocco Israel's next defence Eldorado?"

⁹⁵ Bob and Evyatar, *Target Tehran*, p. 239

⁹⁶ Maximising the impact of existing capabilities entails heightening the interoperability between them. If UAE received the F-35, for it to be effective, it would need to integrate it with ground forces and intelligence. Interview with Asher Fredman, November 2023.

⁹⁷ Bob and Evyatar, *Target Tehran*, p. 242.

II. Unfreezing the Abraham Accords Through Stronger Trade Integration

Increasing Trade to Boost Regional Economic Growth and Security

At the heart of the Abraham Accords is the idea that regional security can be improved by strengthened trade between the signatories. At the signing of the Abraham Accords, Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu envisaged that the economic benefits of the Abraham Accords would spill over to a political resolution that would shore up the security for all, declaring, "this peace will eventually expand to include other Arab states, and ultimately it can end the Arab-Israeli conflict once and for all."⁹⁸

While the Abraham Accords did not produce a resolution to the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, it did economically integrate Israel and a few GCC states by fostering trade between them. This creates both an economic and a strategic opportunity for the UK. While the US focuses on providing regional frameworks rather than trade expansion, the UK has an opportunity to improve its own trade terms with the region and benefit from the economic expansion that the Abraham Accords makes possible. In turn, the UK can utilise its economic engagement with the region to advance the Abraham Accords.

The US is not seeking to expand trade deals between Israel, UAE and Bahraini companies. Instead, the US is providing overarching frameworks such as the Negev Forum, which aims to create greater economic ties but lacks a trade working group. The Biden Administration has diplomatically promoted both the Negev Forum, between Bahrain, Egypt, Israel, Morocco, the UAE and the US, and also the I2U2 forum in October 2021, between India, Israel, the UAE and the US, which is meant to create business collaborations.⁹⁹ While the Trump Administration established the Abraham Fund, which was meant to invest in relevant projects, this was not adopted by the Biden Administration. Apart from succeeding to bring together foreign ministers of the Abraham Accords, the Negev Forum has not managed to generate tangible results. Similarly, the I2U2 forum has not led to multiple collaborations between member states. It has, however, notably led to the UAE investing US\$2 billion in agriculture and food security in India which will use US and Israeli technologies. The I2U2 is also investing in an Israeli-backed food corridor between the UAE and India to contend with wheat shortages due

⁹⁸ "Events and Speeches: PM Netanyahu's Speech at the White House Signing Ceremony for the Historic Peace Agreements, the "Abraham Accords", with the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain", Prime Minister's Office, 15 September 2020, https://www.gov.il/en/departments/news/event_peace_speech150920

⁹⁹ It is not clear what actual support the I2U2 forum would offer as it does not provide companies with financial support, however it would offer networking opportunities with potential business partners. Some legislation that the US Congress proposed was meant to allocate funds to foster economic integration among Abraham Accords partners but none of it was enacted except for the envoy position. Interview with Asher Fredman, November 2023.

I2U2 advances its aims as cooperating on "joint investments and new initiatives in water, energy, transportation, space, health, and food security" ("Joint Statement of the Leaders of India, Israel, United Arab Emirates, and the United States (I2U2)", White House Briefing Room, 14 July 2022, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2022/07/14/joint-statement-of-the-leaders-of-india-israel-united-arab-emirates-and-the-united-states-i2u2/>). So far, only projects related to energy, space and food security have been announced.

to Russia's invasion of Ukraine and plans to create a joint space venture utilising the capabilities and space-based observation data of I2U2 partner countries.

Bilateral trade between signatories has however improved, and demonstrates the potential of the Abraham Accords, and also the value to the UK of playing a part in the region's economic expansion.

a) Israel's Trade with the UAE

Over 96% of tariffs between Israel and the UAE were removed with their Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA), which came into effect in April 2023, benefiting sectors like agriculture and pharma, which covers 99% of UAE-Israel trade.¹⁰⁰ Israel and UAE expect their CEPA to increase bilateral trade from US\$2 billion in 2022 to US\$10 billion within five years. The UAE also expects the agreement to increase its GDP by 0.4% by 2030,¹⁰¹ while the Rand Corporation projects that over the next 10 years, trade between Israel and the UAE in diamonds, industrial goods and services is expected to create a 0.8% increase in the UAE's GDP.¹⁰² In the first 10 months of 2023, bilateral trade between Israel and the UAE had increased by 25% (US\$2.56 billion), compared to the first 10 months of 2022.¹⁰³

Israel is the world's second largest hub for the agrifood-tech and water-tech sectors, with around 400 companies. The UAE is cooperating with Start-Up Nation Central to promote agrifood-tech innovation that can facilitate both nations addressing their shared food and water security challenges.¹⁰⁴

In 2022, the UAE's sovereign wealth fund, Mubadala Investment, invested US\$100 million in Israeli venture capital firms in the technology sector.¹⁰⁵

b) Israel's Trade With Bahrain

Trade between Israel and Bahrain has not grown to the same extent as with the UAE. In the first 10 months of 2023, bilateral trade between Israel and Bahrain reached US\$10.3 million (down by 0.96% from the first 10 months of 2022).¹⁰⁶ Israel and Bahrain are in talks for an FTA.

¹⁰⁰ "Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement Between the Government of the United Arab Emirates and the Government of the State of Israel", United Arab Emirates Ministry of Economy, 31 May 2022, <https://www.moec.gov.ae/documents/20121/1347101/IL-UAE+CEPA+Consolidated+Eng+Final.pdf>

¹⁰¹ New Zealand Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, "UAE - Israel Free Trade Deal enters into force", May 2023, <https://www.mfat.govt.nz/en/trade/mfat-market-reports/uae-israel-free-trade-deal-enters-into-force-may-2023/#:~:text=Both%20countries%20announced%20that%20they,GDP%20by%200.4%25%20by%202030>

¹⁰² Daniel Egel, Shira Efron and Linda Robinson, *Peace Dividend: Widening the Economic Growth and Development Benefits of the Abraham Accords* (Rand Corporation, 2021). <https://www.rand.org/pubs/perspectives/PEA1149-1.html>

¹⁰³ Israel Central Bureau of Statistics, Trade Numbers, October 2023 https://mcusercontent.com/b13665af3a26816104ad86ff4/files/2164ac22-582f-2d3a-a55e-30764ef9ce67/Bilateral_Trade_Oct._2023.pdf

¹⁰⁴ Zev Stub, "Start-Up Nation Central to connect UAE with AgriFood-Tech startups", *The Jerusalem Post*, 14 July 2021, <https://www.jpost.com/israel-news/start-up-nation-central-to-connect-uae-with-agrifood-tech-startups-673795>

¹⁰⁵ Rory Jones and Dov Lieber, "U.A.E. Just Invested \$100 Million in Israel's Tech Sector as Both Countries Get Closer", *The Wall Street Journal*, 14 January 2022, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/u-a-e-sovereign-wealth-fund-invests-100-million-in-israel-venture-capital-firms-11642164356>

¹⁰⁶ Abraham Accords Peace Institute.

As a regional financial hub, Bahrain is focused on financial services and fintech. As such, Israel's two largest banks (Bank Hapoalim and Bank Leumi) have made an agreement with the National Bank of Bahrain enabling their customers to conduct financial transactions and banking operations in both Israel and Bahrain¹⁰⁷ in areas like trade, banking clearing and investment, as well as foreign currency and securities trading. It will also facilitate cooperation between regional business sectors, with an emphasis on financial technology and finance.¹⁰⁸

c) Israel's Trade with Morocco

Trade between Israel and Morocco increased in the first 10 months of 2023 by 111.86% (US\$94.6 million) compared to the first 10 months of 2022.

¹⁰⁷ "Israel's two largest banks sign cooperation agreements with Bahrain's NBB", Al Arabiya, 17 January 2021, <https://english.alarabiya.net/business/economy/2021/01/17/Israel-s-two-largest-banks-sign-cooperation-agreements-with-Bahrain-s-NBB>

¹⁰⁸ Steven Scheer and Saeed Azhar, "Israeli banks Hapoalim, Leumi sign cooperation agreements with Bahrain's NBB", Reuters, 17 January 2021, <https://www.nasdaq.com/articles/israeli-banks-hapoalim-leumi-sign-cooperation-agreements-with-bahrains-nbb-2021-01-17>

Increasing the UK's Diplomatic and Economic Engagement with the Gulf

In contrast to the US's approach of creating broad diplomatic frameworks such as the Negev Forum and I2U2, Britain's soft power in the region extends from its diplomatic, economic and trade interests and uniquely positions the UK to deepen and broaden the Abraham Accords to include other GCC states. This in turn could increase foreign investment from the Gulf into the UK.

Due to the UK's close diplomatic relations with GCC states, it is perfectly positioned to conduct strategic dialogues and Track 2 diplomacy to deepen and expand the Abraham Accords. Britain's Foreign Secretary, Lord David Cameron, has been conducting shuttle diplomacy to the region to de-escalate tensions in Gaza and Yemen. The UK recognises the need to engage a security architecture like the Abraham Accords to coordinate local actors. To this end, Cameron is seeking to establish a Contact Group with the US, key EU, Gulf and Arab countries and Turkey to ameliorate regional tensions.¹⁰⁹ As part of Britain's bid to expand the Abraham Accords in order to quell regional tensions, Britain is considering recognising a Palestinian state.¹¹⁰ This would also advance Saudi Arabia's normalisation of ties with Israel. This rationale is also informing US President Biden's plan to recognise a demilitarised Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza Strip.¹¹¹

Britain's diplomatic engagement in the region may also assist the UK's ambitions in negotiating a free trade agreement with the GCC or with individual Gulf states that will ultimately constitute a new market for UK businesses to engage with.

The GCC is the UK's seventh largest export market (£61.3 billion in 2022). Currently, 70% of the UK's trade with the GCC is with Saudi Arabia and the UAE.¹¹² As a result, an FTA with these countries could bolster trade in the future exponentially. Furthermore, between 2020 and 2030, Saudi exports are projected to rise from US\$171 billion to US\$354 billion and UAE exports are set to grow from US\$166 billion to US\$299 billion.¹¹³

Over the past few years, the UK has demonstrated its interest in signing an FTA with the GCC as a bloc. A trade deal with the GCC is expected to increase UK–GCC trade annually by at least 16%. The Department for Business and Trade projects that an FTA with the GCC could boost the UK's trade with the bloc by around £8.6 billion to £15.8 billion in 2035. This could, in turn, increase the UK's GDP by around £1.6 billion to £3.1 billion over the same period.¹¹⁴ GCC

¹⁰⁹ "Foreign Secretary returns to Middle East to support efforts towards regional stability", Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, 30 January 2024, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/foreign-secretary-returns-to-middle-east-to-support-efforts-towards-regional-stability>

¹¹⁰ James Landale, "UK considering recognising Palestine state, Lord Cameron says", BBC News, 31 January 2024, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-68137220>

¹¹¹ Thomas Friedman, "A Biden Doctrine for the Middle East Is Forming. And It's Big", *The New York Times*, 31 January 2024, <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/01/31/opinion/biden-iran-israel.html>

¹¹² "Talks continue on free trade deal set to boost UK-GCC commerce by 16%," *Arab News*, 2 August 2023

¹¹³ Freddie Neve, "UK-GCC Free Trade Negotiations: Obstacles and Opportunities", Asia House, 9 May 2022, https://asiahouse.org/research_posts/uk-gcc-free-trade-negotiations-obstacles-and-opportunities/

¹¹⁴ "UK-Gulf Cooperation Council: Free Trade Agreement The UK's Strategic Approach", Department for International Trade, June 2022,

demand for international goods and services is forecast to grow by 35% to £800 billion by 2035.¹¹⁵ Simon Penney, Head of Middle East at Gemcorp Group and UK Trade Commissioner for the Gulf region, has identified that, “The GCC wants to import the goods and services that the UK wants to export.”¹¹⁶ To that end, the UK deems that an FTA could spur GCC economic growth by encouraging trade and investment in various developing sectors such as ports, manufacturing, industry and the digital economy that have already attracted investments.¹¹⁷

It appears likely that the UK will successfully negotiate a GCC-wide FTA in the near future. This would increase its economic leverage and could help deepen the Abraham Accords and overcome the impediments presented by the domestic considerations of its signatory states. While according to the Rt Hon Sir Liam Fox MP it would be ideal to achieve a GCC wide FTA, he identifies that there is a hierarchy of types of trade agreements that all offer different levels of liberalisation. At the apex are multilateral agreements, followed by plurilateral regional agreements and finally bilateral FTAs.¹¹⁸ Another option is regulatory alignment that could produce significant changes in bilateral trading¹¹⁹ that could circumvent the distrust that, as already discussed, exists between GCC states in military affairs, and is also reflected in economic matters. This economic distrust has led to a trend towards localisation by Gulf states and divergence in their trading rules. The achievement of a GCC-wide FTA would enable the UK to transcend the heterogeneous nature of the GCC with its states at different stages of economic diversification, with differing priorities and diverse regulatory environments. Different GCC states seek to protect different specific sectors. To prevent cheap foreign labour from undermining Saudi firms, Saudi Arabia is imposing tariffs of up to 15% on products made by other GCC-based companies whose workforces rely too heavily on foreign nationals.¹²⁰ Similarly, the UAE has brought in protectionist measures on iron and steel, increasing tariffs to 10% in 2019. The UAE has also withdrawn from preparations to launch a GCC currency and monetary union. Such protectionist measures may complicate the UK’s bid to achieve an FTA with the GCC. The bloc has, in recent years, failed to finalise FTAs with China, the EU, New Zealand, Turkey and India. However, it appears that the UK may be able to break this trend.

This or an equivalent series of plurilateral or bilateral trade agreements would enable the UK to increase its trade and investments with a group of diversifying economies. Mutually beneficial economic incentives could foster regional prosperity and stability among Abraham Accords partners, and also encourage more states in the region to become signatories of the Abraham Accords.

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1084548/uk-gcc-fta-the-uks-strategic-approach.pdf

¹¹⁵ Matthew Robinson, “Free Trade: A New Chapter in UK–GCC Relations”, Euro-Gulf Information Centre, 2022, <https://www.egic.info/free-trade-a-new-chapter-in-uk-gcc>

¹¹⁶ Simon Penney, “How a Free Trade Agreement with the GCC will benefit UK business”, Gemcorp Capital, 22 June 2022, <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/how-free-trade-agreement-gcc-benefit-uk-business-simon-penney/>

¹¹⁷ Neve, “UK-GCC Free Trade Negotiations”

¹¹⁸ Sir Liam Fox notes that while bilateral FTAs provide a useful tool for trade liberalisation, they produce less of an outcome. Interview with the Rt Hon Sir Liam Fox MP, PhD, former UK Minister of Defence, February 2024

¹¹⁹ Sir Liam Fox identifies that regulatory alignment would however require advance preparation to determine which regulatory changes would produce the greatest outcome. Ibid.

¹²⁰ Ibid.

GCC states are not the only countries whereby domestic considerations impede regional integration. High-tech accounts for 12% of Israel's employment, more than half of Israel's exports, 25% of income taxes and nearly a fifth of its overall economic output.¹²¹ The combination of the domestic response to Israel's judicial reform prior to 7 October, as well as Israel's conflict with Hamas, has significantly impacted Israel's standing as a high-tech "start-up nation."

Funding for Israeli start-ups had already begun to drop prior to Israel's debate over judicial reforms. Tech fundraising in Israeli start-ups reached US\$26 billion in 2021 in 779 rounds. But it dropped to US\$16 billion in 2022, mainly in the first half of the year before the global economy began to slow, and again to about US\$7 billion in 2023. Since 7 October 2023, at least 15% of the tech workforce has been called up for military reserve duty.¹²² Jeremy Levin, former CEO of TEVA and emeritus chairman of the Biotechnology Innovation Organization (BIO) expressed that he expects that investment in Q1 2024 will drop dramatically as nearly all firms are pulling back due to uncertainty in the economy and the ongoing war in Gaza. Levin has noted that term sheets are currently being pulled and very few, if any, new high-tech start-ups are being funded. Delegations from Israel's high-tech sector have presented to the Knesset Finance Committee requesting support for this key driver of the Israeli economy. So far, few if any steps have been taken.¹²³ This undermines the attractiveness of Israel to GCC states. As GCC states are seeking to economically diversify, Israel's high-tech prowess was perceived as enormous added value.

It is in the interests of Israel, the US and the GCC members to have a robust tech industry which exports its technologies to parties to any Accord. Jeremy Levin identifies that the current dearth of funding, coupled with the critical importance of this industry to Israel, the US and the high-tech industry globally, offers an opportunity for all parties to consider establishing a multinational fund to invest in Israeli high-tech start-ups with the intention to foster technology agreements between Israel and Gulf partners to a revised Abraham Accord. The goal would be to create a regional technology hub, building on the strengths of the Israeli tech sector and Gulf capital. Such a fund would represent a building block for comprehensive economic development in all countries and foster regional mutual interest and interdependencies.¹²⁴

This could feed into Abu Dhabi's Economic Vision 2030 which identifies economic diversification as a "key pillar" to grow the non-petroleum sector by 7.5% annually. As such, it seeks to position itself as a key node in international trade corridors and establish itself as the main gateway from Asia to Europe, the Middle East and Africa. Similarly, Saudi Arabia's 'Vision 2030' seeks to invest in various sectors, including digital economy, healthcare, education, infrastructure, recreation and tourism, and to diversify its export revenues. Saudi Arabia

¹²¹ Steven Scheer, "Israeli startups raised \$1.5 bln in Q4, \$7 bln in 2023", Reuters, 28 December 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/technology/israeli-startups-raised-15-bln-q4-7-bln-2023-12-28/>

¹²² Ibid.

¹²³ Conversation with Jeremy Levin, former CEO of TEVA and emeritus chairman of the Biotechnology Innovation Organization (BIO).

¹²⁴ Ibid.

projects that by 2030, metals and minerals will be 80% of its exports, plastic and rubbers will be 7% and chemicals and pharmaceuticals will be 6%.¹²⁵

As Gulf countries seek to diversify their economies and increase their exports, the UK has a good opportunity to ensure that it benefits from GCC efforts at economic diversification by engaging in those areas in which it has comparative advantage, such as financial services¹²⁶ or green industries. The UK's competitive advantage in various sectors would leverage its economic ties with GCC states to deepen and benefit the Abraham Accords.

The UK's comparative advantage in financial services and its importance as a global finance hub also make it a "prime spot for developing green finance solutions around the world".¹²⁷ The UK has existing advantages in offshore wind production, and carbon capture, usage and storage due to its geographical location and its expertise in manufacturing components.¹²⁸ The UK's clean technologies sector is growing by 2% annually and offers technological advantage in innovation in this area¹²⁹ and "with the elimination of tariffs on UK exports to the Gulf on things like wind turbine parts, a deal could afford better opportunities for the UK private sector to support GCC countries as they aim to diversify their economies away from oil and gas and towards other renewable energy technologies."¹³⁰

However, the UK's bid to provide clean technologies to GCC states as part of the GCC's energy transformation may be frustrated by China's bid to facilitate the energy transformation of GCC states (see also the next section on broader challenges from China to the Abraham Accords).

¹²⁵ Ibid.

¹²⁶ The UK's economic appeal to GCC states is its larger comparative advantage in financial services than the US. This is due to the UK being a "narrowly specialised economy" that is "only competitive in financial services and ancillary business services" (including R&D services, professional and management consulting, technical and trade-related consulting services). Furthermore, the UK is a "services-exporting superpower". Esin Serin et al., "Seizing sustainable growth opportunities from carbon capture, usage and storage in the UK", LSE, 22 September 2021, <https://www.lse.ac.uk/granthaminstitute/publication/seizing-sustainable-growth-opportunities-from-carbon-capture-usage-and-storage-in-the-uk/> In 2019, the UK was the fifth-largest exporter in the world, exporting US\$900 billion of goods and services, of which US\$418 billion was services, making it the second highest exporter of services in the world. See Josh De Lyon et al., "Enduring strengths: Analysing the UK's current and potential economic strengths, and what they mean for its economic strategy, at the start of the decisive decade", Resolution Foundation, April 2022, <https://www.resolutionfoundation.org/app/uploads/2022/04/Enduring-strengths.pdf> UK services exports to the GCC was worth £12.1 billion in 2021. In 2021, the total trade between the UK–GCC was worth £33.1 billion. "UK launches ambitious trade deal with Gulf nations" Press Release, 21 June 2022 <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/uk-launches-ambitious-trade-deal-with-gulf-nations#:~:text=The%20GCC%20is%20equivalent%20to,%C2%A312.1%20billion%20last%20year.> The UK exports more than double the global average share of financial services – US\$230 billion (Ibid.). The UK is also, Simon Penney notes, a world leader in tech, cyber, life sciences, education, creative services, AI, financial services, and renewable energy (Penney, "How a Free Trade Agreement with the GCC will benefit UK business").

¹²⁷ Tej Parikh, "Britain needs to decide what it wants to be good at", *Financial Times*, 8 March 2023, <https://www.ft.com/content/2240fde9-7951-4a2a-aa4d-2230d38c1eae>

¹²⁸ Esin Serin et al., "Seizing sustainable growth opportunities from carbon capture, usage and storage in the UK", LSE, 22 September 2021, <https://www.lse.ac.uk/granthaminstitute/publication/seizing-sustainable-growth-opportunities-from-carbon-capture-usage-and-storage-in-the-uk/>

¹²⁹ De Lyon et al., "Enduring Strengths."

¹³⁰ Robinson, "Free Trade".

China is seeking to cooperate with the GCC in areas including clean energy such as wind power, solar photovoltaic, nuclear, hydrogen and biomass, power batteries and smart charging piles.¹³¹ Furthermore, China advanced the idea of establishing a GCC–China forum dedicated to the peaceful utilisation of nuclear energy, as well as providing training opportunities for 300 GCC citizens in this field.¹³²

In goods, the UK has a relative strength in aircraft, art, beverages and pharmaceuticals.¹³³ The UK also specialises in personal, cultural and recreational services.

Even in sectors where Britain does not specialise, it has the ability to spur on economic partnerships within the Abraham Accords to promote regional growth. Egypt benefits enormously from the Qualifying Industrial Zones initiative, as Egyptian textiles with 9% Israeli input can enter the US tariff free. Moroccan textiles do not receive the same benefits and are subject to high tariffs. By providing similar incentives on joint trade initiatives for participants of the Abraham Accords, Britain could help expand the Accords and serve as a major source market for Morocco.¹³⁴

¹³¹ “GCC–China discuss free trade agreement”, Muscat Daily, 22 October 2023, <https://www.muscatdaily.com/2023/10/22/gcc-china-discuss-free-trade-agreement/>

¹³² Abdel Aziz Aluwaisheg, “China and the GCC plan for a brighter future in the Gulf”, *Arab News*, 13 December 2022, <https://www.arabnews.com/node/2215611>

¹³³ De Lyon et al., “Enduring Strengths.”

¹³⁴ Interview with Asher Fredman, November 2023.

III. Threats to the Abraham Accords

The Challenge of Chinese Influence

While the US retreat from the Gulf has caused GCC states to align more closely with Israel, the retreat of American power has also encouraged them to court China's growing influence in the region. Rear Admiral Chris Parry considers that despite the US's presence in the region, its attempt to pivot towards the Indo-Pacific has led China to become an additional security guarantor in the region, something that will inevitably lead to its increasing military presence in the Middle East.¹³⁵ In a March 2023 testimony to the Senate Armed Services Committee, Gen. Michael Erik Kurilla, Commander of US Central Command, asserted that "The People's Republic of China has chosen to compete in the region. The PRC is aggressively expanding its diplomatic, informational, military, and economic outreach across the region."¹³⁶ According to analysis by the *Financial Times*, China has had more diplomatic missions in the Middle East than Western nations since 2013.¹³⁷ In 2023, China's brokering of the restoration of diplomatic relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran was a major breakthrough, and a demonstration of its new regional importance.

As US military power recedes, it is inevitable that regional states will look to China as a potential new security guarantor. Equally, the more China's economic ties to the region expand, the more it is likely to feel the need for a larger military footprint to protect its interests – especially if America continues to step back. However, despite the US identifying China's increasing role in the region, this shifting dynamic did not inform the original Abraham Accords.¹³⁸ Any attempt to revive and expand the Accords must also confront the challenge of China's influence. As the US seeks to scale down its regional presence, the UK has an important regional role to play to ensure that Gulf trade and security remains Westwards facing.

China's increasing regional presence has led Saudi Arabia to pursue a multi-layered strategy, benefiting from the US's security architecture while also increasing both economic and security ties with China. China is Saudi Arabia's top trading partner. Bilateral trade volumes between the two states reached 295.6 billion Saudi riyals (US\$78.8 billion) in the first nine months of 2022, according to data from the General Authority for Statistics. China is also the UAE's largest non-oil trading partner. In turn, the UAE is China's second-largest trading partner.¹³⁹ In turn, Rear Admiral Chris Parry considers that this contributed to Saudi Arabia and the UAE's decision to reach out to China and supply energy to China in exchange, he

¹³⁵ Interview with Rear Admiral Chris Parry CBE, January 2024.

¹³⁶ "Statement for the Record, General Michael "Erik" Kurilla, Commander, US Central Command: Before The Senate Armed Services Committee On The Posture Of US Central Command", US Senate Armed Services Committee, 16 March 2023, <https://www.centcom.mil/MEDIA/Transcripts/Article/3332606/senate-armed-services-committee-hearing-on-posture-of-uscentcom-and-usafricom-i/>

¹³⁷ Joe Leahy, Kathrin Hille, Andy Lin and Michael Pooler, "'Dare to Fight': Xi Jinping unveils China's new world order", *Financial Times*, 31 March 2023, <https://www.ft.com/content/0f0b558b-3ca8-4156-82c8-e1825539ee20>

¹³⁸ Interview with General (ret.) Joseph Votel, December 2023.

¹³⁹ Aarti Nagraj and Sarmad Khan, "Why a China-GCC free trade agreement might be a game changer", *The National News*, 2 February 2023, <https://www.thenationalnews.com/business/2023/02/03/why-a-china-gcc-free-trade-agreement-might-be-a-game-changer/>

believes, for a guarantee from Beijing protecting them from a nuclear Iran.¹⁴⁰ As a result, a dynamic is created that Saudi Arabia and the UAE conduct agreements with the US and China simultaneously, while eyeing normalisation with Israel. This creates a vulnerability for the Abraham Accords¹⁴¹ – since China seeks to orientate the GCC eastwards, it is in Beijing's strategic interest to undermine the US's strategic policy of Vietnamization.

China has not yet developed a physical military presence in Saudi Arabia, but it is incrementally reaching this goal. The People's Liberation Army Navy's ongoing Chinese Naval Escort Taskforce (CNET) in the Gulf of Aden and along Africa's east coast frequently stops at Saudi Arabia's port.¹⁴² Saudi Advanced Communications and Electronics Systems Co. and China Electronics Technology Group Corp have created a joint venture named 'Aerial Solutions' to build military drones in the kingdom.¹⁴³

China is funding a military base at the Khalifa Port near Abu Dhabi as part of 'Project 141' which is China's initiative to expand its military and logistical support network across the world.¹⁴⁴

On the economic front, China is stepping up its regional diplomatic efforts by securing its energy imports from the Gulf. In the process, it is effectively financing the GCC's energy transformation and economic diversification efforts, such as Saudi Arabia's 2030 Vision and Kuwait's 2035 Vision. In turn, these GCC countries' Vision projects include regional and Gulf state-owned oil and gas companies transitioning to more sustainable sources of energy. In the process, they are integrating their economies with China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) projects.

This is leading China to fund energy transition projects of GCC members in sectors like power generation, petrochemicals and sustainable housing.¹⁴⁵ An example is China's National Machinery Industry Corporation which, as part of the BRI, built the Al Dhafra Solar Photovoltaic Project, the world's largest solar panel farm, in the UAE ahead of COP28 as a flagship project.¹⁴⁶

China's security competition with the West in the Gulf is spilling over to Beijing competing economically with the West in an attempt to bring GCC states into its sphere of influence.

¹⁴⁰ Interview with Rear Admiral Chris Parry CBE, January 2024.

¹⁴¹ Ibid.

¹⁴² Jonathan Fulton, *China's Relation to the Gulf Monarchies* (London: Routledge, 2018), p. 98.

¹⁴³ Agnes Helou, "Chinese and Saudi firms create joint venture to make military drones in the kingdom", *Defense News*, 9 March 2022, <https://www.defensenews.com/unmanned/2022/03/09/chinese-and-saudi-firms-create-joint-venture-to-make-military-drones-in-the-kingdom/>; Joe Saballa, "Chinese, Saudi Firms to Jointly Develop Military Drones", *The Defense Post*, 11 March 2022, <https://www.thedefensepost.com/2022/03/11/china-saudi-military-drones/>

¹⁴⁴ "Defying US, China resumes construction of military base in UAE", *Middle East Observer*, 1 May 2023, <https://middleeastobserver.org/2023/05/01/defying-us-china-resumes-construction-of-military-base-in-uae/>

¹⁴⁵ Giulia Interesse, "China and the GCC: Bilateral Trade and Economic Engagement", *China Briefing*, 25 August 2022, <https://www.china-briefing.com/news/china-and-the-gcc-bilateral-trade-and-economic-engagement/>

¹⁴⁶ Ling Xin, "China engineers complete largest solar farm on Earth in UAE ahead of Cop28", *South China Morning Post*, 25 November 2023, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/science/article/3242801/china-engineers-complete-largest-solar-farm-earth-uae-ahead-cop28>

Another key economic battleground is digital infrastructure. “The UK has identified digital trade as a priority and is taking steps to realize its ambitions on this front.”¹⁴⁷ This is being challenged by GCC states seeking to increase cooperation with China in transitioning their traditional infrastructure to a digital economy infrastructure that entails smart network transitioning which in turn aligns GCC states with China’s digital systems.¹⁴⁸ In turn, China’s Digital Silk Road aims to export its “sovereignty and control” model of technology governance¹⁴⁹ to the GCC whose digital economies are growing twice as fast as those of other advanced economies.¹⁵⁰ This has led China to focus on upgrading the level of connectivity within GCC states. China has sought to develop digital infrastructure across the GCC, being a global leader in e-commerce, fintech, cloud computing, ICT exports, digital payments and investments in digital technologies.¹⁵¹ It is easier for Chinese companies to achieve this than Western companies as state-owned enterprises naturally work in close contact with the state and can do this with Saudi Arabia and other GCC states.¹⁵²

Saudi Arabia has exported smart city technology to 15 Middle Eastern countries¹⁵³ and signed agreements with Chinese companies and institutions to collaborate in constructing smart cities as well as develop AI technologies in Arabic. As such, China has been a significant supplier of goods and investments for grand infrastructure projects like NEOM, a smart city.¹⁵⁴

The Saudi Data and Artificial Intelligence Authority (SDAIA) has signed an agreement with Alibaba Cloud that provides Saudi Arabian cities with intelligence-driven smart city solutions. Similarly, Saudi Arabia’s National Centre for Artificial Intelligence will work with Alibaba Cloud to develop digital and artificial intelligence for smart cities. To this end, they will jointly develop energy, education, health, safety and security, mobility and urban planning. Saudi Arabia’s National Centre for Artificial Intelligence (NCAI) is projected to collaborate with

¹⁴⁷ Pepijn Bergsen et al., “Digital trade and digital technical standards: Opportunities for strengthening US, EU and UK cooperation on digital technology governance”, Chatham House, January 2022, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/2022-01/2022-01-24-digital-trade-digital-technical-standards-bergsen-et-al.pdf>

¹⁴⁸ “China to Enhance Investment in GCC Energy, Infrastructure Projects”, Asharq Al Awsat, 23 October 2023, <https://english.aawsat.com/business/4622691-china-enhance-investment-gcc-energy-infrastructure-projects>

¹⁴⁹ Bergsen et al., “Digital Trade and Digital Technical Standards”

¹⁵⁰ Edward Liamzon, “Laying the foundation of the region’s digital economy”, *Arabian Business*, 7 March 2022, <https://www.arabianbusiness.com/opinion/laying-the-foundation-of-the-regions-digital-economy>

¹⁵¹ Mordechai Chaziza, “China-GCC Digital Economic Cooperation in the Age of Strategic Rivalry”, Middle East Institute, 7 June 2022, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/china-gcc-digital-economic-cooperation-age-strategic-rivalry>

¹⁵² Thus, Fan Bao, CEO of China Renaissance, an independent investment bank, asserted that Chinese technology firms are better equipped than US companies such as Google and Facebook to capture a lucrative share of the Saudi internet industry. See Justina Crabtree, “Why China’s tech giants are better suited to Saudi Arabia than Google and Facebook”, Yahoo Finance, 27 October 2017, <https://finance.yahoo.com/news/why-china-apos-tech-giants-124038559.html>

¹⁵³ James Kynge and Nian Liu, “From AI to facial recognition: how China is setting the rules in new tech”, *Financial Times*, 7 October 2020, <https://www.ft.com/content/188d86df-6e82-47eb-a134-2e1e45c777b6>

¹⁵⁴ Tom Ravenscroft, “Everything you need to know about Saudi mega-project Neom”, *Dezeen*, 14 February 2023, <https://www.dezeen.com/2023/02/14/neom-guide-line-saudi-arabia/>

Huawei in training local AI engineers to improve skills and support a diversified and data-driven economy.¹⁵⁵

China is also active in developing the UAE's digital infrastructure. Huawei is building a Modular Data Centre Complex Project at Dubai International Airport and is collaborating with the Dubai Electricity and Water Authority (DEWA), in the construction of fibre-optic infrastructure and video surveillance.¹⁵⁶ Huawei contributed to building the largest solar-powered Uptime Tier III-certified data centre in the Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum Solar Park¹⁵⁷ and is partnering with the Abu Dhabi City Municipality (ADM) to construct a Municipal Disaster Recovery Data Centre.¹⁵⁸

Different international theatres are converging in the Middle East. As a result, the US and UK cannot focus on the Abraham Accords as the bedrock for the emerging regional security architecture without acknowledging China's growing role in the region, both as a diplomatic and economic challenger, and increasingly a rival security guarantor as well.

¹⁵⁵ Karl Flinders, "Saudi Arabian authorities work with Chinese IT giants on digital goals", *Computer Weekly*, 22 October 2020, <https://www.computerweekly.com/news/252490964/Saudi-Arabian-authorities-work-with-Chinese-IT-giants-on-digital-goals>

¹⁵⁶ Chaziza, "China-GCC Digital Economic Cooperation."

¹⁵⁷ Government of Dubai, "Press Release: Hamdan bin Mohammed inaugurates the world's largest solar-powered data centre," 16 February 2023 <https://www.dewa.gov.ae/en/about-us/media-publications/latest-news/2023/02/hamdan-bin-mohammed-inaugurates>

¹⁵⁸ Jason Saundalkar, "ADM and Huawei announce build and certification of municipal data centre", *ME Construction News*, 1 October 2020, <https://meconstructionnews.com/43618/adm-and-huawei-announce-build-and-certification-of-municipal-data-centre>

Detering Iran and its Proxies

As well as the geopolitical challenge of China seeking to extend its sphere of influence in the region, Iran is also a regional disruptor seeking to expel the US from the Middle East. As such, Iran is threatened by the Abraham Accords and the prospect of Saudi Arabia normalising relations with Israel. This led Iran's proxy Hamas to launch the 7 October attack in Israel, massacring 845 Israeli civilians and taking 250 hostages.

Hamas's massacre was followed by the Houthis, another Iranian proxy, launching missiles and drone attacks targeting merchant vessels in the Red Sea. International trade has been severely disrupted with shipping lines suspending operations and taking the longer journey around Africa.

An ancillary benefit to Iran of Hamas's 7 October attacks, and its subsequent unleashing of its proxies across the region, is that the focus of the international community has been diverted. The regime has been given breathing room to consolidate power internally and advance its nuclear program.¹⁵⁹

In order to reinvigorate the Abraham Accords in the face of escalating regional threats, it is essential to deter Iran from further acts of proxy war. While the US will take the lead, as we have seen in the case of the Houthis, the UK has an important partnership role in such actions.

Sir Liam Fox considers that there is no possibility of direct military strikes at this point in time as both sides will want to avoid direct military conflict. There are, however, other punitive measures that we can and should adopt in response to Iran's behaviour via its proxies, not least in their clear attempts to frustrate and, if possible, break the Abraham Accords to stop any rapprochement between Arab states and Israel. This is due to the fact that Iran continues to believe that Israel should be eliminated as a sovereign state entirely.¹⁶⁰

There are different orders of response that the UK and US are likely to adopt vis a vis Iran and its proxies. If Iran continues to unleash its "axis of resistance", the following escalatory ladder demonstrates some of the potential responses that may be necessary to restore deterrence against Iran and provide the conditions for further expanding the Abraham Accords.

¹⁵⁹ Interview with Ilan Berman, Senior Vice President of the American Foreign Policy Council, December 2023. Francois Murphy, "Iran undoes slowdown in enrichment of uranium to near weapons-grade - IAEA", Reuters, 26 December 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/iran-undoes-slowdown-enrichment-uranium-near-weapons-grade-iaea-2023-12-26/>

¹⁶⁰ Interview with Sir Liam Fox, former UK Minister of Defence, February 2024

- 1) In a bid to localise the conflict and prevent its escalation, the Biden Administration fails to apply pressure on Iran by refusing to acknowledge a link between Iran and Hamas. It may also assert that proxies such as Hamas, Hezbollah and the Houthis are acting independently.¹⁶¹
- 2) Just as the US Department of State designated the IRGC a terrorist organisation in April 2019, the British Government should follow suit. Furthermore, Iran Air should be prohibited from operating at British airports, and Iranian banks should be banned from operating in the City of London.¹⁶²
- 3) Rather than striking Iran or targeting its proxies due to reduced political will, there will be greater will for the UK and US to support the Iranian opposition.¹⁶³
- 4) The US may re-establish an onerous sanctions regime and enforce sanctions to reduce Iran's foreign reserves to prevent it from pursuing its nuclear program.¹⁶⁴
- 5) The Houthis are currently being targeted by joint US–UK forces.¹⁶⁵ These strikes are likely to go after Houthi defence radar, coastal defence missile systems, command and control locations, and locations used to support drone operations.¹⁶⁶
- 6) Joint UK–US forces can target fixed site Houthi command and control centres as well as Yemeni helicopters that fly the Houthis.¹⁶⁷
- 7) The US could work with the UK to implement an embargo or blockade vessels departing Iran by turning them around in the Straits of Hormuz and Gulf of Oman to prevent them from reaching Yemen. The US could cut down some of the facilitation routes and work with regional partners to deny flight access for Mahan Air, an Iranian company which works for the IRGC by moving its enabling gear around. The US could do more to disrupt its supply chains in Syria and Iraq.¹⁶⁸
- 8) As Iranian proxies escalate attacks across the region, the US may respond to attacks on US bases and personnel in the region by targeting IRGC facilities in Syria and Iraq.¹⁶⁹
- 9) IRGC generals could be targeted in Tehran.¹⁷⁰

¹⁶¹ Brett Samuels, "Biden on whether US is in proxy war with Iran: 'No'", *The Hill*, 12 January 2024, <https://thehill.com/homenews/administration/4405820-biden-says-us-iran-not-in-proxy-war/>

¹⁶² Interview with the Sir Liam Fox, former UK Minister of Defence, February 2024

¹⁶³ Interview with Ilan Berman, December 2023.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid.

¹⁶⁵ Gen Joseph Votel noted that in 2016, when the Houthis fired missiles (far fewer than now), the US swiftly struck back. The first stage was to get more resources in there via an international task force to protect shipping and restore the confidence of the commercial community so that they could safely move vessels due to greater military presence in the southern part of the Red Sea. Interview with General (ret.) Joseph Votel, December 2023.

¹⁶⁶ Interview with General (ret.) Joseph Votel, December 2023.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid.

¹⁶⁹ Interview with Professor Michael Clarke, November 2023.

¹⁷⁰ "US must respond to Iran with tough talk, tough action: Nathan Sales", Fox News, 3 December 2023.

10) Carlos Del Toro, the US Navy Secretary, recently commented that he could not rule out the US and its allies taking direct military action against Iran.¹⁷¹ The US could seek to eliminate the threat from Iran's nuclear program. This would involve targeting Iranian airfields to take them offline, along with missile batteries, drone bases and command-and-control, in order to prepare the way for a strike on nuclear facilities from the air.¹⁷² This would be followed by the US targeting IRGC bases in Iran, potentially including even the residences of Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei. Nuclear sites would be targeted in subsequent strikes, some more than once as surveillance would determine the extent of damage to each.¹⁷³ Israel would likely need to strike nearly simultaneously at Hezbollah launchers and stockpiles. Syria, Iraq and the Houthis would remain untouched unless they engaged in any serious way.¹⁷⁴

While not comprehensive, this order of response would be proportional to a hierarchy of escalating strikes by Iran and its proxies in the region. Joint operations between the UK and the US would signal to regional partners that we are committed to the region, shoring up the Abraham Accords. This in turn is likely to generate increased levels of confidence among regional signatories to the Abraham Accords and prevent them from seeking to diversify their partnerships and enter China's sphere of influence.

¹⁷¹ Tony Diver, "Britain should boost troops to counter Russia threats, suggests Biden official", *Daily Telegraph*, 25 January 2024, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/world-news/2024/01/25/britain-should-boost-troops-biden-official/>

¹⁷² Surprise plane flights over Iran would last until they drop their ordnance. In such a scenario, oil terminals would likely not be a major target. After all, if the regime happened to fall amidst the chaos, the oil terminals would be needed to fuel post-Islamic Republic Iran. Nor would the submarine bases be primary targets, as Iran's diesel submarines do not give the country a qualitative military edge nor do they pose a serious threat to other countries' submarines or blue water navies, at least outside the Persian Gulf. Interview with Michael Rubin, Senior Fellow at the American Enterprise Institute, December 2023.

Senator Lindsey Graham has expressed the opposite view – that the US should target Iranian oil refineries and the Iranian Navy, including missile strikes at Bandar Abbas Naval station. Gen James Stavridis also adopts an expansive view that critical Iranian infrastructure (oil and gas facilities, refineries, shipping terminals and the electric grid of Lebanon and Iran) could be targets for US cyber-attacks (Miranda Nazzaro, "Graham: US should threaten Iranian oil infrastructure", *The Hill*, 10 September 2023, <https://thehill.com/policy/international/4246338-graham-us-should-threaten-iranian-oil-infrastructure/>).

Stavridis also believes that Iranian infrastructure in the Gulf, such as maritime platforms and gas and oil piping well heads, could also be targets (James Stavridis, "What the US Should Do About Iran", Bloomberg, 4 November 2023, <https://www.bloomberg.com/opinion/articles/2023-11-04/iran-s-actions-in-israel-hamas-conflict-risk-drawing-us-in-deeper?leadSource=uverify%20wall>).

In contrast, Gen (ret.) Joseph Votel voiced the concern that Iran today is not the Iran of 10-15 years ago. It has a more sophisticated missile system. Getting into a war with Iran would be a significant detractor from more strategic imperatives such as China. The question is how the US can re-establish a level of deterrence in the region that gets Iran back in its box, ends the current conflict and addresses the Houthis and other proxies perpetrating attacks on US facilities in order to reach a manageable status quo as prior to 7 October. Interview with General (ret.) Joseph Votel, December 2023.

¹⁷³ Facilities buried under mountains need not be destroyed; only their entrances would need to be targeted to entomb the scientists working below. Interview with Michael Rubin, December 2023.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The UK could reinvigorate the Abraham Accords and deepen collaboration among regional allies by aligning its global strategy to better reflect its foreign investments and economic footprint. A more comprehensive global strategy entails increasing UK defence expenditure significantly. Increased resources will allow the UK military in the Middle East to be more strategic and anticipatory and to have greater force projection in the region. This will also deepen UK ties with GCC states and enable the UK to maintain interoperability with US platforms, while securing its trade routes and access to GCC markets. This would also enable the UK to maintain its political credibility across GCC states and attract foreign investment to the UK from the GCC. Conversely, current military budget levels are likely to require the UK to adopt a more reactive response with a limited force projection.

The UK should consider contributing its military assets to joint exercises with GCC states which can foster increasing military integration among partners of the Abraham Accords. By conducting joint operations with the US against the Houthis, the UK has demonstrated its importance as a partner in shoring up the emerging security architecture in the region. This creates the context for increased trade among GCC states and Israel and contributes to the economic diversification of GCC economies. In turn, this offers opportunities for further British economic engagement in the region.

Alongside its defence of maritime security, the UK Government could advance and promote plans to facilitate overland trading routes – especially in concert with Jordan and Saudi Arabia. It is economically advantageous for goods to take three days to go from Haifa to Dubai instead of three weeks via the Suez Canal.

The UK has laboriously pursued an FTA with the GCC as a bloc, rather than the potentially swifter option of negotiating bilateral FTAs with individual GCC countries or pursuing regulatory alignment with GCC states. The UAE secured bilateral FTAs with Israel and India, and has potential bilateral FTAs under negotiation with Indonesia and Colombia. Similarly, the US has bilateral FTAs with Bahrain and Oman. By pursuing a GCC-wide FTA, plurilateral, or a series of bilateral agreements with GCC states or regulatory alignment, the UK can influence digital rules and standards, and blunt China's influence.

All signatories to the Abraham Accords should consider establishing a multinational fund to invest in Israeli high-tech start-ups leading to a regional tech hub that would spur economic development across the region.

The UK and US Governments should adopt a unified stance on a hierarchy of escalation in the face of Iranian aggression. This should be communicated to Iran along with a shared commitment to respond along these lines to aggression by Iran or its proxies. This may have the desired effect of putting Iran back in its box and helping to reassure the UK's regional allies.

As part of a coordinated strategy to deter Iran and create the conditions for the Abraham Accords to flourish, the British Government should designate the IRGC as a terrorist organisation, Iran Air should be prohibited from operating at British airports, and Iranian banks should be banned from operating in the City of London.

The UK should join the Abraham Accords as a co-signatory alongside the United States.



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