



# Trans European Policy Studies Association

## TEPSA BRIEFS

JANUARY 2022

### The New Political Landscape of the Middle East: A New European Iran Strategy

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#### *Abstract*

*In recent years the Middle East has experienced unprecedented political challenges. Opportunities for progress, however, have opened up as well. With a European perspective in focus, this brief explores three recent diplomatic innovations in the region: international efforts to address Iran's nuclear ambitions, initiatives for the normalisation of regional relations with Israel, and the latest efforts to address the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.*

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#### Introduction

In recent years, with the exception of Iran and the Palestinian Authority, the states across the Middle East have either openly or through diplomatic signals expressed interest in the normalisation of relations with Israel. Due to the global importance of the region, these changes toward stability and away from conflict are and will be positive for European stability. These changes are best observed through the examination of three international efforts for peace and security in the region: the

Iran Deal, Abraham Accords, and the Trump Peace Plan. These three separate pieces, when put together, form the puzzle of the new political landscape in the Middle East. Each tasked with separate objectives, as a whole, they have the capacity to bring lasting peace and prosperity to the region, with one caveat: their long-term success hinges on the addition of a comprehensive arms embargo to the Iran deal.

#### Iran Deal

For over a decade, Europe has played a significant role in curbing Iran's nuclear ambitions. However, there have been continuous differences between the European approach toward the challenge and the worries across Iran's neighbouring states. Iran's ballistic missiles program as well as the state's sponsorship of aligned militia groups throughout the region have caused the stir. Iran's neighbours see its nuclear capabilities and its ballistic missiles program closely intertwined with the country's regional ambitions. The regional states have, therefore, hoped the Iran deal could be a potential mechanism to address the troubling developments. The July 2015 signing of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) -

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also known as the Iran deal – however, did not successfully address the challenges of the ballistic missiles program and the sponsorship of militias across the Middle East. The Obama-era United States, China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom, Germany, and the European Union - the signatories to the agreement with Iran - distinguished the said challenges from the country's potential for development of nuclear weapons. The JCPOA required Iran to curb its nuclear capacities in exchange for international economic incentives. The critics of the agreement have objected to the sunset clauses of the agreement. These provisions that permit gradual easing of the imposed nuclear restrictions, in the critics' view, will be used by the country for development of nuclear weapons. Such capability combined with Iran's growing ballistic missiles arsenal will therefore further fuel the regional military tensions.

The 2016 election of Donald Trump as US president led to the materialisation of his presidential campaign pledge of addressing persisting challenges in the Middle East including the non-nuclear threats by Iran. The United States' withdrawal from the Iran deal in May 2018 was a step taken by the administration in this direction. Along with nuclear issues, the Trump administration further bounded the Iran deal - effectively an international vehicle for the reintroduction of the state to global diplomatic and economic communities - to the country's ballistic missiles and regional activities. This became formulated and introduced in a list of 12 further conditions<sup>1</sup>. The approach was opposed by Iran, which retaliated later through armed attacks across the region. This illustrates Iran's conventional capacity for regional destabilisation and willingness for international blackmailing. Iran's main military

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<sup>1</sup> WSJ. (2018). U.S. Lays out Demands for New Iran Deal. Available online: <https://www.wsj.com/articles/mike-pompeo-lays-out-next-steps-on-iran-1526909126> (accessed 02 January 2022).

<sup>2</sup> NPR. (2020). U.S. Kills Top Iranian Military Leader in Airstrike. Available online:

commander only second to the Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, Qasem Soleimani, was consequently assassinated in January 2020 in Iraq by a US Air Force drone strike<sup>2</sup>. In spite of this increase in violence, the Biden administration has returned to the talks with JCPOA signatories with a goal of reviving the agreement - without the 12 additional requirements set by the Trump administration.

## **Abraham Accords**

Historic agreements on the normalisation of relations between Bahrain, United Arab Emirates and Israel were signed in September 2020 in the White House. The agreement between the UAE and Israel, officially titled "Abraham Accords Peace Agreement: Treaty of Peace, Diplomatic Relations and Full normalisation Between the United Arab Emirates and the State of Israel," and the agreement between Bahrain and Israel officially titled "Abraham Accords: Declaration of Peace, Cooperation, and Constructive Diplomatic and Friendly Relations," are collectively known as the Abraham Accords. The agreements essentially bypass the long-lasting dependency of such relations on a pre-resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Through these agreements, the signatories committed to the establishment of diplomatic relations and the pursuit of normalisation of relations through cooperation in the areas of science, art, medicine, and commerce<sup>3</sup>. Since the 2020 commitments, Sudan, Morocco, and Oman have also taken similar steps toward the normalisation of relations with Israel. Linked to this wave of change in international relations, in Europe, Kosovo and Serbia established diplomatic relations with Israel.

<https://www.npr.org/2020/01/02/793208096/iraqi-tv-says-top-iranian-military-leader-killed-in-rocket-strikes-on-iraqi-airp> (accessed 02 January 2022).

<sup>3</sup> State. (n.d.). The Abraham Accords Declaration. Available online: <https://www.state.gov/the-abraham-accords> (accessed 02 January 2022).

The Achievement of normalised relations has been the result of intensive diplomatic efforts by the United States. These efforts initially became public at the 2019 Warsaw Summit. The international gathering hosted states representatives for discussions on ways forward in the Middle East region. Iran viewed the talks as formation of opposition to the country's foreign policies and therefore boycotted the summit. Regardless, the European Union has expressed support for the Abraham Accords, as Berlin hosted a summit of the foreign ministers of Germany, Israel, and UAE in October 2020.

The initial Abraham Accords alone have unblocked a number of regional stalemates. Such changes include the opening of flight paths, the establishment of diplomatic missions between the initial signatories - Bahrain, Israel, and UAE - and the high-profile visits of capitals. Whilst in trade, Israel and UAE exceeded \$600 million of trade in 2021 with the expected rise of more than \$1 trillion over the next decade, whilst Bahrain and Israel reached over \$300,000 in the same year.<sup>4</sup> Although by far a small portion of each state's market, the Bahraini-Israeli relation has created the potential for Bahrain to become the gateway for Israeli trade with the biggest market in the Arab world, Saudi Arabia.

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*The agreements essentially bypass the long-lasting dependency of such relations on a pre-resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.*

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<sup>4</sup> Bloomberg. (2021). UAE Eyes \$1 Trillion Economic Activity With Israel Over 10 Years. Available online: <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-09-13/uae-seeks-1-trillion-in-economic-activity-with-israel> (accessed 02 January 2022); Times Of Israel. (2021). Israel's trade with Arab states has surged since 2020 peace deals, data shows. Available online: <https://www.timesofisrael.com/israels-trade-with-arab-states-has-surged-since-2020-peace-deals-data-shows/> (accessed 02 January 2022).

<sup>5</sup> White House. (2020). Peace to Prosperity: A Vision to Improve the Lives of the Palestinian and Israeli People. Available online:

## Trump Peace Plan

A peace plan titled "Peace to Prosperity: A Vision to Improve the Lives of the Palestinian and Israeli People", also known as the Trump Peace Plan, was unveiled in January 2020 in the White House. The framework contains both economic and political components, which include an end to the persistent Israeli-Palestinian conflict, establishment of a Palestinian state, as well as economic development for both peoples<sup>5</sup>. The framework also accounts for an investment fund toward the realisation of the plan. The deal further considers Jerusalem as the capital of Israel and provisions a Palestinian capital in the Jerusalem District. This component was realised prior the official introduction of the deal by the relocation of the US embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem in May 2018<sup>6</sup>, a decision that had been postponed since the ratification of the Jerusalem Embassy Act of 1995<sup>7</sup>. Whilst the deal was fully rejected by the Palestinian Authority, the European Union and the United Kingdom welcomed the efforts for peace and prosperity for the Israeli and Palestinian peoples - the parties however objected to the deal's land swaps which entail annexations by Israel. Since the introduction of the peace plan, Hamas-controlled Gaza has casted doubts on the achievement of the plan's objectives. In response to the peace plan in May 2021, Hamas, a designated terrorist organisation by the EU, fired over 3,000 rockets on Israeli

<https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/Peace-to-Prosperity-0120.pdf> (accessed 02 January 2022).

<sup>6</sup> State. (2018). Remarks at the Dedication Ceremony of the U.S. Embassy in Jerusalem. Available online: <https://2017-2021.state.gov/remarks-at-the-dedication-ceremony-of-the-u-s-embassy-in-jerusalem/index.html> (accessed 02 January 2022).

<sup>7</sup> Congress. (1995). Jerusalem Embassy Act Of 1995. Available online: <https://www.congress.gov/104/plaws/publ45/PLAW-104publ45.pdf> (accessed 02 January 2022).

towns<sup>8</sup>. These missiles have been developed by Iranian aid and knowhow.<sup>9</sup>

## Conclusion

Since 2019, the Middle East has experienced tectonic shifts across the region's geopolitical landscape. American and European initiatives and incentives have been instrumental to this new Middle Eastern political landscape. In this process, Israeli trade - specifically technology-based trade - has further augmented the efforts for regional peace and prosperity. Going forward, continuation of the efforts by the involved parties will be crucial for maintenance of the historic momentum in the normalisation of regional relations with Israel. In this process it is also time for European recognition of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel.

Accounting for the region's trade importance as well as the pressures caused by conflict-induced migration flows, a stable Middle East will continue to be in the European interest. However, throughout this brief it was shown that Iran continues to source insecurity across the region and undermines international initiatives for regional stability. Whilst European efforts for prevention of a nuclear-armed Iran have been essential for regional stability, these works remain overshadowed by other destabilisation factors. To this end, Iranian regional destabilisation efforts cannot be decoupled from insecurities caused by the country's military nuclear ambitions. Doing so is not only a missed opportunity but will likely bring the region to the point of no return from war. Now a chance remains for European diplomatic and strategic reconsideration of the Iran deal for a comprehensive approach towards Iranian regional security challenges. An indefinitely prolonged UN arms embargo,

bounded within the Iran deal, is the minimum needed change in this direction. Such approach will be in the interest of Europe, the region, and the globe.

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<sup>8</sup> White House. (2021). Press Briefing by Press Secretary Jen Psaki, May 17, 2021. Available online: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/press-briefings/2021/05/17/press-briefing-by-press-secretary-jen-psaki-may-17-2021/> (accessed 02 January 2022).

<sup>9</sup> WSJ. (2021). With Iranian Help, Hamas Builds 'Made in Gaza' Rockets and Drones to Target Israel. Available online: <https://www.wsj.com/articles/with-iranian-help-hamas-builds-made-in-gaza-rockets-and-drones-to-target-israel-11621535346> (accessed 02 January 2022).

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Co-funded by  
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