



EXPERT INSIGHT | Center for American Security

THE ABRAHAM ACCORDS MINDSET: A BOLD VISION FOR THE MIDDLE EAST AND AMERICA

Jacob Olidort, Ph.D., and Jared Stone

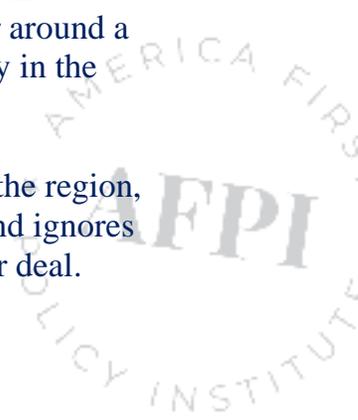
TOPLINE POINTS

- What made the Abraham Accords successful was not simply the agreement on paper, but the embrace of a “mindset” shared by Israel, its Arab neighbors, and America’s leadership.
- The features of this mindset are: traditions and history matter more than ideology; strong borders remove barriers; and progress depends on listening rather than lecturing.
- The Abraham Accords mindset can also be the very antidote needed to respond to the Biden Administration’s domestic policies, just as it is to sustain peace in the Middle East.

This year’s anniversary of the signing of the Abraham Accords agreement coincides with the 20th month of the Biden Administration, and the two dates may share a common insight. The signing of the Abraham Accords was the single most significant step toward peace in the Middle East in a quarter of a century, and it resulted in not only diplomatic recognition but the normalization of ties between the people of Israel and Arab states. It was, in a word, historic.

But what made the Abraham Accords so successful was not simply the agreement on paper between Israel and its Arab neighbors to normalize relations, but also the embrace of an Abraham Accords “mindset” by these nations and America’s leadership that enabled America’s allies of seemingly different perspectives to come together around a shared vision for the future. This mindset has aspects that are relevant not only in the foreign policy space but also in the domestic one.

The Abraham Accords agreement continues to reap countless benefits across the region, even as the Biden Administration avoids mentioning the historic agreement and ignores the region altogether, outside of a narrow focus on bringing Iran into a nuclear deal.



Earlier this year, Israel signed a free trade agreement with the United Arab Emirates (UAE) that lifted tariffs off 96% of trade between the two nations. A year ago, Israel, the UAE, and Bahrain participated in their first joint naval exercise. Meanwhile, Israel and the UAE have launched collaborations on cancer research, space missions, and investments in Africa.

The three defining features of this mindset and the key paradigm shifts of the Abraham Accords they informed can be summarized as follows: first, traditions and history matter more than ideology; second, strong borders remove barriers; and third, progress is founded on listening rather than lecturing.

Seen through the prism of America in 2022, the Abraham Accords mindset is the very antidote needed to respond to some of the Biden Administration's domestic policies, just as it is to sustain peace and prosperity in the Middle East. The Washington establishment's view of the Middle East, just like the Biden Administration's view of America, refuses to embrace the world for what it is, instead seeking to impose singular ideological paradigms on others. The result is more conflict among people rather than responding to their needs.

In the Middle East, former Secretary of State John Kerry summarized the Washington position that there would be “no separate peace between Israel and the Arab world” without first addressing the Palestinian issue. This included refusing to implement U.S. law in recognizing Jerusalem as the capital of Israel. The “peace deals” with the Palestinian governments led to bloodshed in the form of terrorist attacks.

The Trump Administration broke with each of these and, in doing so, created new opportunities for peace between Israel and its neighbors. It also restored accountability to the Palestinian government by halting U.S. support to it until it stopped rewarding terrorists' families. The Trump Administration was resolute in standing with Israel and its Gulf allies, especially in recognizing Jerusalem as Israel's capital and moving the U.S. embassy, withdrawing from President Obama's Iran deal, and instead imposing a crippling “maximum pressure” sanctions campaign against the Iranian government.

The profound change the Trump Administration achieved in the Middle East mirrored the transformational change it shepherded in America—promoting the correct teaching of our history and unabashed defense of our values, creating unprecedented opportunities for broad segments of American society, particularly for the economically disenfranchised, and unleashing a new dawn of both domestic and foreign policy by working with a broad range of stakeholders.

Put differently, the Abraham Accords mindset broke with decades of Washington's failures in the Middle East while spurring a successful America First agenda at home. It



is this precise mindset that is needed to revive the America First agenda in today's America.

Only by reinforcing the policies that have proven to have served Americans can we ensure we are able to project American leadership overseas, including in the Middle East, in a manner that advances peace and prosperity there. It is why the America First Policy Institute (AFPI) is launching a Middle East Peace Project, because at no time more so than today have our relationships with our friends in the Middle East hinged upon the promotion of an America First vision domestically.

Preserving the Abraham Accords mindset also means ensuring the correct teaching of history about the Middle East that enshrines our allies abroad and our values at home. It includes combatting radical state-sanctioned ethnic studies curricula in public schools, upending the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions movement's grip on American colleges and universities, and challenging the Biden Administration's accommodationist approaches towards the Iranian and Palestinian governments.

No other issue compares to the Middle East in reflecting more profoundly how much our representation of other nations and their histories directly affects how we understand our own. Doing so requires that we first understand the paradigm shifts introduced by the Abraham Accords mindset, both in the Middle East and in America.

It is also critical to provide a reminder of what an America First approach to foreign policy means. It is an approach toward America's engagement with the world, as exhibited by the previous administration, that is informed by the following principles:

America must be independent and secure; America leads in the world; America recognizes the prudential limits of American power and rejects the failed policies from the past; bold decisions to support American interests and enhance the capability, credibility, and purpose of American allies; and America's insistence on burden sharing among its allies in the name of collective security.

Traditions versus Ideologies

Since the State of Israel's founding in 1948, which the United States almost instantly recognized, Israel's neighbors have pushed political ideologies aimed at demonizing the young nation while erasing the longstanding presence of religious minorities in the Middle East. The Trump Administration, particularly in recognizing Jerusalem as the true capital of Israel, turned this vision on its head. This policy affirmed that Israel's identity ought to be not only recognized but also celebrated. It also meant, especially alongside the halt to payments to the Palestinian Authority, that Israel's security is a prerequisite to peace in the Middle East.



This reversal found an audience with Israel’s neighbors in the Gulf. Not only was denying Israel’s identity and sovereignty illogical but doing so helped advance the ideological agendas of their shared adversaries: radical Islamists and, in particular, the Iranian government.

Indeed, the calls by the Trump Administration to root out radical Islamist ideology—in words and in actions, especially with the defeat of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) caliphate and the elimination of terrorist masterminds Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and Qasem Soleimani—further cemented America’s stance on delivering peace. It was also a stark contrast with the equivocations of the Obama Administration, which refused to acknowledge the role of ideology and instead focused on a vague “violent extremism.”

In addition to their immediate threats, the maneuvers of Iran and other mutual adversaries risk compromising the intellectual and cultural heritage of the Middle East, home for millennia to a range of religious communities who were integral contributors to the social and religious capital of the region. This perspective, informed by history, has made the Abraham Accords’ nascent ties between the people of Israel and the Gulf monarchies not only welcomed but genuine.

While no history of course is without its blemishes, embracing history offers the only way to move forward. Substituting it with baseless ideologies that not only distort reality but which foment hatred and violence is a recipe for retrogression.

On his first day of office, President Biden signed Executive Order 13985, which argued that “entrenched disparities in our laws and public policies, and in our public and private institutions, have often denied that equal opportunity to individuals and communities,” proceeding to lay out a vision for his advancement of woke precepts by promotion of equity and disaggregating federal datasets along racial lines (the executive order’s definition of “equity” includes only certain historically marginalized communities and not others).

A later executive order on Asian-American discrimination contended that “xenophobia, racism, and nativism have deep roots in our Nation.” Woke ideology and policies betray the vision of the late Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., of his children “not [being] judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character” and the goal of the civil rights movement to achieve color-blindness in American society.

The Biden Administration’s institutionalization of wokeism within the federal bureaucracy has imposed a historically unconscious approach to diplomacy abroad and education at home. President Biden has explicitly sought to turn Saudi Arabia into a “pariah state,” even imposing new sanctions on the Saudi government, despite the



country's crucial prospects of deterring Iran and safeguarding Israel and our other regional allies. Domestically, he has elevated Randi Weingarten, president of the American Federation of Teachers, who defended historically obtuse Critical Race Theory (CRT) as a “method of examination... that helps analyze whether systemic racism exists” and promoted radical gender identity reeducation among military brass. This, despite the fact that CRT regularly aligns itself with anti-Israel and antisemitic motives in pedagogy, and CRT-infused mandatory public-school curriculum in California was found by Jewish legislators to “eras[e] the American Jewish experience.”

The Biden Administration's promotion of woke ideology—in policy, in the military, and in America's classrooms and social life—serves to diminish America's interests while establishing new obstacles to American progress. In its most pernicious form, this includes the penalization of servicemembers for exercising their religious liberties and a sprawling and politicized targeting of broad segments of the population in the name of fighting “extremism.”

Removing or destroying statues does not change history. Rewriting curricula to pin our Middle East allies as aggressors only undermines history and the sovereignty of our regional friends. Moreover, not only does it eliminate the opportunity to learn from history and to move forward from it, but the very act of removal or destruction sets a precedent of historical unconsciousness that portends further violence and destruction in the Middle East.

Strong Borders Breaking Down Barriers

The Trump Administration's recognition of the strategically critical area of the Golan Heights in March 2019 sent a clear message: strong borders reflect America's commitment to our allies' security and sovereignty. Indeed, a key pillar of the America First foreign policy of the Trump Administration was an elevation of the nation-state as the most effective partner in diplomacy and the most authentic expression of the needs of that nation's citizens.

Israel, as much as any other nation, is not only entitled to its own secure borders but also its own sovereignty and self-expression independent of multilateral settings. Indeed, the name and function of its miraculous missile defense system—the “Iron Dome”—as well as the importance of its security fence make exactly this point: keeping people safe from threats, including military attacks, can be achieved without resorting to violence.

These physical barriers have proven time and again to be critical when international political settings provide a platform for the demonization of Israel. That is why the Trump Administration opted to withdraw from the United Nations Human Rights Council and extract U.S. taxpayer dollars from the United Nations Relief and Works



Agency—two entities that provide a forum for adversaries and notorious human rights abusers to threaten, both rhetorically and materially, the State of Israel.

These moves aligned with the Trump Administration’s approach to multilateral institutions, which it pushed to ensure they advanced Americans’ needs and interests. It was also reflected in the Trump Administration’s preference for bilateral engagement with other nations outside multilateral settings.

By challenging these staid border-less structures, the Trump Administration created openings for nations to explore areas of collaboration with their neighbors and, in some cases, with nations that were not traditionally allies, as was the case in the Middle East. This model also took place in the Pacific, with deeper collaboration among our allies there who shared a common perspective on the threat of Communist China.

America not only established more effective ways of advancing Americans’ interests in the Middle East through bilateral engagement but also encouraged similar engagement and advancement of common interests among its allies. The recognition of strong borders and sovereignty directly fostered greater collaboration and connectivity between nations.

Among its first priorities after President Biden’s inauguration, and no doubt as a knee-jerk political response, the Biden Administration re-entered the United States in multilateral institutions from which the Trump Administration had withdrawn. This move sent a diplomatic message that mirrored a message at home: borders no longer matter. America is one with the world, and its priorities are shared by those of its “like-minded partners” to use the parlance of its “Interim National Security Guidance” document released in 2021.

But “like-minded” does not mean “America-minded,” and indeed, America needs to be able to work with an array of partners, including those that are not like-minded, as we at AFPI explain. Denying borders and sovereign interests, particularly those that an American president is charged with protecting, can also lead to confusion, inefficiency, and even conflict, as exemplified by America’s inability to deter Putin from invading Ukraine or Communist China from flying sorties over Taiwan.

It is part of the same worldview that corrupts a seemingly compassionate sentiment into damaging consequences for Americans and their families, letting out criminals into the streets, opening the U.S. southern border, enabling human traffickers, and letting crime and narcotics into American neighborhoods.

By advancing the formation of strong borders abroad and at home—in diplomacy and pedagogy—our country can promote an America First vision that reflexively strengthens our institutions, citizenry, and partnerships in the Middle East.



Listening versus Lecturing

During the Trump Administration, for the first time, our allies in the Middle East were not told what to do or think about their region. President Trump's first overseas visit was to Saudi Arabia, where he addressed the heads of Muslim-majority nations, saying plainly that “[w]e are not here to lecture—we are not here to tell other people how to live, what to do, who to be, or how to worship. Instead, we are here to offer partnership—based on shared interests and values—to pursue a better future for us all.”

By extension, no pre-existing Washington talking points or paradigms were relevant; America's first step was to listen. President Trump challenged the world to observe the region for what it is, what the dynamics between its people and nations are, and where points of commonality with America's interests exist.

Despite its simplicity, this statement marked a profound shift from the conventional Washington “wisdom.” Importantly, President Trump's words did not imply that America could not demand certain expectations from its allies and even adversaries—even in the course of listening to them. And it helped that America's demands aligned with what the region needed most: stability, a contained Iran, free movement of energy and goods, a diversified Saudi economy, and even progress on civil liberties. Indeed, there is a difference between lecturing and informing, and it is crucial for our allies to be clearly informed of America's interests.

The rest of his remarks during that visit focused narrowly on one goal—“to conquer extremism and vanquish the forces of terrorism.” As Islamism is an ideology that emanates from within Muslim-majority countries, it is, therefore, those nations' responsibility to lead in rooting it out. How they do so is their prerogative to determine.

It is perhaps even easier for them to do so with solutions from within their own borders and traditions rather than through fictionalized solutions imposed on them by the U.S. In this way, the Trump Administration departed from the Bush Administration and its “nation-building” projects of narrowly trying to grow democracy in a region where the concept had little resonance and could not be further removed from reality.

In the narrowest sense, America and the world need an end to terrorism. America informs our allies what it needs, and in turn, it listens to what they and their people need to build a prosperous future.

This too flies in the face of Washington policymaking, and the Biden Administration repeats it in the Middle East. The highlights of President Biden's three-day visit to Saudi Arabia included a public chiding of Saudi counterparts and divergence from Israel in how



to stop Iran. Disagreements certainly may exist, but they ought to be ironed out in private so that some common platform may be presented in public.

President Biden’s visit is representative of a broader disengaged approach to the Middle East, a region that—like President Obama before him—he only saw from the narrow vantage point of an Iran nuclear deal. Accommodating Iran and America’s adversaries was, the American people were told, the correct policy. In practice, marginally delaying Iran from its pursuit of a nuclear weapon was falsely equated with preventing it from happening.

Similarly, the Biden Administration, much as administrations before the Trump Administration, prioritizes the elevation of Palestinian leadership and aid thereto as integral to achieving peace, even as that same gesture removed accountability and encouraged its rewards of terrorism. Defeating ISIS was, in President Obama’s parlance, a matter of addressing “political and economic grievances” and not a specific ideological worldview.

These were all practices of lecturing the American people, and our allies abroad, in a language that only the Washington establishment speaks. In the case of President Obama, those lectures were framed around an ideologically-informed apology for America’s “imperialist” legacy in the region and the need to accommodate Iran and the Palestinians—a particularly dangerous fiction.

There are clear, albeit remote, parallels in other portfolios. One can look to the Biden Administration’s talking points, which pinned the rise in gas prices on Putin’s invasion of Ukraine rather than on the Biden Administration’s restrictive domestic energy policies, asserted “Green New Deal” policies as being in America’s interest even as those policies mean greater dependence on Communist China, and promoted mass-spending bills as being non-inflationary.

Lost in this lecturing has been the ability of our government to listen to what the American people desire at home, what our allies require abroad, and how best to address those needs.

Conclusion

Even with the continued successes of the Abraham Accords agreement, the Abraham Accords mindset has been put to the test by forces both at home and overseas. Pushing back against these forces—in both the narrow sense of advancing the correct understanding of the Middle East and the broader sense of combatting the pernicious impact of wokeism and the priorities of today’s Left—is imperative not only to our



partnerships and the pursuit of peace in the Middle East but also to protect who we are and the America that we know and love.

BIOGRAPHIES

Jacob Olidort, Ph.D., is the Director of the Center for American Security, and Director of the Center's Middle East Peace Project, at the America First Policy Institute.

Jared Stone is a Policy Analyst in the Middle East Peace Project of the Center for American Security at the America First Policy Institute.

