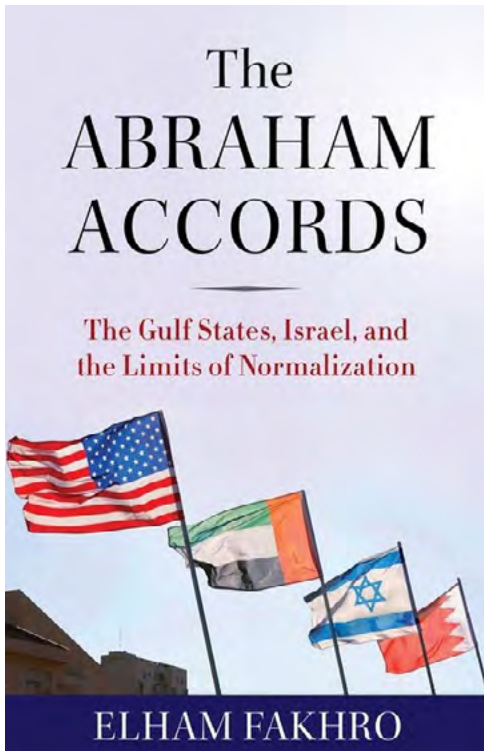




The Abraham Accords: The Gulf States, Israel, and the Limits of Normalization

By Elham Fakhro

(Columbia University Press, 2024)

ISBN: 9780231212380

Reviewed by Burak Elmalı

Researcher at TRT World Research Centre

The opinions expressed in this review represent the views of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the TRT World Research Centre.



Over the past decade, the Gulf's geopolitical landscape has shifted dramatically, reshaping regional alliances and diplomatic priorities. The Arab Spring (2010-2011) heightened Gulf monarchies' focus on security and reinforced fears of Iran's growing regional influence through proxies in Syria, Iraq, Yemen, and Lebanon. Against this backdrop, the [Abraham Accords](#) signed at the White House by the UAE, Bahrain, and Israel on September 15, 2020 marked a historic departure from the long-standing policy of linking [normalisation](#) (the establishment of diplomatic relations between states after a period of conflict or discord) with Israel to Palestinian statehood. This was driven largely by shared security concerns – particularly regarding Iran – and economic cooperation. However, since 7 October, the war in Gaza has cast massive uncertainty over these agreements, exposing the fragility of normalisation amid renewed tensions over the Palestinian cause and Iran's confrontation with Israel.

Elham Fakhro's latest book, *The Abraham Accords: The Gulf States, Israel, and the Limits of Normalisation* writes against this background and examines the process of normalisation within the geopolitical landscape of the Gulf. Comprising six comprehensive chapters plus an introduction and conclusion, the book examines the normalisation process between the (UAE and Bahrain with Israel. much has been written on the Abraham Accords from policy and security studies perspectives, Fakhro brings a fresh analytical lens, incorporating diverse expert voices and emphasising the underlying constraints and long-term implications of these agreements.

The first chapter, "A Promised Land", historicises the trajectory of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict from the [1917 Balfour Declaration](#) to the present, discussing wars, peace efforts, and the central actors involved. For decades, Gulf states maintained their stance on the non-recognition of Israel as a reflection of Arab solidarity with the Palestinian cause, using the conflict as a litmus test for regional diplomacy. Shifts in this stance, particularly in recent years, illustrate how changing regional priorities – such as countering Iran and securing economic partnerships – have influenced diplomatic realignments.

The second chapter, "A New Generation of Gulf Leaders", explores the rise of Mohammed bin Zayed (MBZ) of the UAE and Mohammed bin Salman (MBS) of Saudi Arabia as pivotal figures in Gulf politics. It highlights how their agency has played a decisive role in shaping foreign policy orientations. Notably, the Arab Spring (2010-2011) is [identified](#) as a critical juncture that significantly influenced the UAE and Bahrain's approach to Israel. The threat posed by Iran – both in terms of its nuclear program and its regional proxy network – along with Israel's increasingly assertive foreign policy under Netanyahu, catalysed a strategic convergence between these Gulf states and Israel. Additionally, the chapter argues that Israel's entrenched influence within US politics acted as a catalyst for the normalisation process.

The third chapter delves into the Abraham Accords under the first Trump administration, adopting a process-tracing approach to outline key developments. Fakhro highlights the instrumental role of Jared Kushner and Avi Berkowitz in facilitating diplomatic negotiations, emphasising the administration's agency-oriented foreign policy approach which bypasses traditional State Department channels and relies on a small, tightly controlled team to shape the agreements. For instance, rather than engaging career diplomats, Kushner spearheaded direct talks with Gulf leaders, leveraging personal relationships to accelerate normalisation efforts. Furthermore, the strategic framing of normalisation as a diplomatic victory by both Trump and Netanyahu, particularly in the run-up to their respective elections, exemplifies how electoral considerations were part of the game.

The fourth chapter, "A New Relationship", examines the economic motivations behind normalisation, particularly for Bahrain on a smaller scale and the UAE on a much larger one. Fakhro provides sector-specific examples of how normalisation, initially driven by trade and investment incentives, rapidly expanded into cooperation across key industries, including the diamond trade, agriculture, water security, healthcare, education, and, most critically, the military and defence sectors. As Fakhro astutely observes:

"While beginning primarily as a trade relationship, the Abraham Accords had evolved into a military and defence relationship between the two sides, bringing Israeli technology and mis-

sile defence systems to the Gulf and drawing both states into a new U.S.-led regional security architecture" (148).

The fifth chapter, "Tolerance-Washing", and the sixth chapter, "Peace and Its Discontents", present interrelated arguments regarding the intersection of foreign policy, domestic politics, and socio-political dynamics. Fakhro offers valuable insights into how Bahrain and the UAE leveraged discursive themes such as interfaith toleration, co-existence, and moderation to promote their national identities in the eyes of the Western audience while simultaneously repressing domestic opposition to normalisation. The analysis of this paradox is particularly illuminating. The suppression of anti-normalisation sentiments through political crackdowns, media censorship, and intensified surveillance exposes the limits of Gulf states' rhetorical commitment to tolerance. Particularly striking is Fakhro's critique of self-orientalism within UAE's political elite, who have a pejorative stance toward domestic dissenters opposing normalisation (196). Furthermore, the discussion on textual discrepancies between the accords' Arabic, Hebrew, and English versions underscores the importance of Gulf public opinion as a factor in diplomatic negotiations – a dimension often overlooked in mainstream analyses.

In his conclusion, Fakhro highlights two major constraints of normalisation: its negative public perception and the increasingly remote prospects for regional peace. Crucially, the book underscores Saudi Arabia's reluctance to enter a normalisation process similar to that of the UAE, positioning this stance within the framework of regional power competition. As a result, Saudi Arabia's demands for normalisation remain significantly high, rendering the process more lucrative than the UAE's.

Three crucial aspects warrant further exploration. First, Fakhro's detailed account demonstrates that normalisation has substantial domestic political ramifications. It appears to correlate with a trend toward authoritarian consolidation in the Gulf context, echoing Robert [Putnam's two-level game theoretical model](#), which points out the need for domestic-international harmony in a negotiation process. The systematic suppression of public opposition to the Accords – ranging

from shutting down political parties and newspapers to imprisoning dissenting opinion leaders and expanding state surveillance – suggests an attempt to align domestic political coalitions with elite preferences manufactured the appearance of consensus via repressive means of control. Further research into this would be welcome.

Second, Fakhro's analysis situates the Abraham Accords within the broader U.S.-Middle East security architecture. The bipartisan consensus in Washington regarding normalisation and American efforts to integrate Gulf-Israel security cooperation into the military and defence domains signals a strategic pivot away from the Middle East. As Fakhro suggests, this shift is likely to manifest more prominently in the second Trump administration, where China would assume greater priority.

Third, Fakhro's conclusions regarding the trajectory of Gulf-Israel normalisation underscore a crucial point: unless a comprehensive peace framework accompanies these agreements, they will remain confined to offering material benefits to select actors rather than fostering sustainable regional stability. Expanding the book's scope to include perspectives from non-Gulf signatories such as Sudan and Morocco would enable a more holistic and comparative understanding of normalisation.

Overall, *The Abraham Accords* is a seminal work in Gulf studies. Its analytical depth, interdisciplinarity and empirical richness make it an essential reference for scholars of Middle Eastern diplomacy and International Relations seeking to understand the evolving contours of Gulf-Israel normalisation and its broader geopolitical implications.