

THE NEW MIDDLE EAST

A PROGRESSIVE APPROACH

LABOUR FRIENDS OF ISRAEL

WORKING TOWARDS A TWO STATE SOLUTION

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

MICHAEL RUBIN, LFI DIRECTOR

LFI is delighted to be publishing *The New Middle East*. After a decade of significant challenges for the Labour party, Israeli progressives and the region as a whole, the last year has seen rays of light on all three fronts.

Most recently, the new Israeli government – with our sister parties Labor and Meretz both back in power where they belong – offers the chance of a fresh start after the toxic and enormously damaging Netanyahu era.

Domestically, under the leadership of Keir Starmer, Labour is returning to serious thinking on foreign policy and working to restore trust with the Jewish community and our friends in Israel.

And, perhaps most significantly, the signing of the Abraham Accords last summer brought out of the shadows the ever-growing partnership between Israel and an alliance of pragmatic Arab states. This partnership has the potential to transform the region, including through breathing new life into the Israeli-Palestinian peace process.

The recent tragic round of violence between Israel and Hamas reminds us of the urgency of working towards a negotiated two-state solution; which remains the only sustainable and just solution to the conflict between Israelis and Palestinians.

The core of this publication, however, isn't about Israel and Palestine. For too long, the foreign policy debate, especially on the left, has been dominated to an obsessive degree by this tiny slither of land between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea. Not only has this disproportionate focus on the world's only Jewish state done absolutely nothing to bring the prospect of peace closer – indeed, we would argue that obsessive demonisation of Israel actively undermines peace – it has also meant that there has been insufficient attention paid to the region as a whole and the significant shifts taking place within it.

We have published this pamphlet to highlight some of these developments, which seldom hit the headlines or receive parliamentary attention. Central to so much of our understanding the Middle East in 2021 is the threat posed by Iran, which is too often not fully appreciated. Our hope is that this pamphlet will begin a conversation on the British left about what a genuinely progressive approach to the Middle East could look like. Indeed – as Baroness Ramsay illustrates in her chapter – the Biden administration provides a practical and contemporary model for Labour to aspire to and learn from.

There are many people we would like to thank for their help in making this pamphlet a reality. Most importantly, we are enormously grateful to all the authors for their contributions which are all fascinating and thought-provoking. We must also thank the following people who have provided ideas, research and analysis: Jennifer Gerber, Matthew Godwin, Tom Murray, Angie McEvoy, Richard Pater and Robert Philpot.

Finally, we would like to thank all of our supporters, parliamentarians and allies for their continued support and endless encouragement. Ten years ago, the hopes of the Arab spring were ultimately frustrated; it is our sincere hope that the next decade is a more positive one for progressives and all who seek a more peaceful and prosperous future for the Middle East and its peoples.

THE TRANSFORMATION OF THE MIDDLE EAST

STEVE MCCABE MP

The last decade has seen big changes in the Middle East. The left needs to think afresh and ask new questions.

This publication from Labour Friends of Israel comes at a highly opportune moment. Ten years ago, the “Arab Spring” saw a wind of change sweep through the Middle East, offering the prospects of reform and democracy in place of the reactionary authoritarianism which had dominated the region’s politics for so long.

But hopes that the Middle East might be witnessing the kind of transition to democracy seen in South America and Eastern Europe in the late 1980s and early 1990s proved short-lived. Instead, the decade ended with the peoples of the Middle East less free, and bloody civil wars in Libya, Yemen and Syria claiming hundreds of thousands of lives and millions of people driven from their homes. The rise of Islamic State – driven back but not yet defeated – adds to this bleak picture, as does the terrible betrayal by the Trump administration of our Kurdish allies in the fight against it.

And, of course, as it has done since 1979, Iran has both benefitted from, and stoked, regional tensions and sectarian divisions. Over the past decade, the expansion of its sphere of influence – across Iraq, Yemen, Syria and Lebanon – has been accompanied by massive violence and bloodshed. The cost of this malign adventurism has been borne by peoples across the Middle East, including in the Islamic republic itself.

Amid this instability, the second decade of the 21st century saw the United States, under administrations of both parties, attempt to downgrade its presence in the region. This aspiration stems from a number of factors – the US, for instance, [now imports](#) more oil from Mexico than Saudi Arabia – which themselves demonstrate the need to rethink how we view the region and its future. But, as the fate of Syria shows, given the malign intentions of players such as Russia and Iran, this is an unsettling shift and one which is unlikely to change under the Biden administration. Indeed, China’s recent conclusion of a 25-year economic and military strategic pact with Iran – a part of its neo-imperialist “Belt and Road Initiative”, which, albeit for a cut-price share of its natural resources, could boost the Islamic republic’s economy by \$400bn – is a further negative development.

And, of course, in recent weeks we have seen a repeat of the horrific cycle of violence – for the fourth time since its violent coup and seizure of power in Gaza in 2007 – between Hamas and Israel. The price has, once again, been paid in the tragic loss of innocent Palestinian and Israeli lives.

Nonetheless, last summer we saw an all-too-rare glimpse of hope in the signing of Abraham Accords and the normalisation agreements concluded between Israel and the UAE, Bahrain, Morocco and Sudan. Shunned and isolated by its regional neighbours, for decades the Jewish state had diplomatic relations with but two – Egypt and Jordan. Seemingly in a matter of weeks, that picture has been dramatically transformed and the processes underpinning it are by no means yet complete.

As Dr Sarah Feuer of the Institute for National Security Studies in Tel Aviv has [outlined](#), these developments have illuminated broader shifts in the contours of the regional order which, although under way for decades, have been sharpened by the events of 2011. The region is now broadly divided into three camps. First, an Iranian-led mainly Shiite camp, which includes Assad’s Syria, Hezbollah in Lebanon, the Houthis in Yemen and Tehran’s powerful militias in Iraq. Second, the “pragmatic” largely Sunni Gulf states, Egypt, Jordan and Morocco, which – although less cohesive, seeks to counter Iran’s

expansionism and radicalism and adopts a more accommodating position with regards to Israel. Indeed, some countries within this group – such as the UAE and Bahrain openly and Saudi Arabia and Oman implicitly – now regard the Jewish state as a potential economic and military ally. Third, the Islamist-aligned Sunni states and groups, including Turkey, Qatar and Hamas. Others, such as the Israeli Middle East historian Itamar Rabinovich, [believe](#) that the interaction between these three regional axes is the principal driver of Middle Eastern politics today.

For much of the past decade, debate on the left concerning the Middle East has been dominated by the question of western interventionism. Some point to the chaos of Libya to warn of its perils; others to the bloodbath in Syria to highlight the dangers of failing to act. These are important matters for debate, but they should not crowd out the development of a wider agenda and set of principles for how a Labour government should interact with the region and what goals it should seek to achieve. Similarly, seeing the Middle East solely through the prism of the tragic conflict between Israel and the Palestinians distorts and narrows our perspective; crucially, it also prevents us from engaging with current realities in the region.

This publication is designed to offer a contribution to the important debate that an aspiring party of government must have about our approach to Middle East. It does not claim or seek to offer comprehensive or conclusive solutions and answers; it is designed to provoke new questions and thinking.

THE CRUSHED HOPES OF THE “ARAB SPRING”

The pent-up frustrations – born of economic sclerosis, a lack of political freedom and rampant corruption – which burst forth a decade ago was both sudden but unsurprising, especially given the Middle East’s youthful population. Long-standing dictatorships were displaced in Egypt, Libya, Yemen and Tunisia and challenged in Syria, Algeria and Bahrain. Sadly, the democratic experiment has endured only in Tunisia. The regime of Abdel-Fattah al-Sisi is, if anything, more repressive than that endured by Egyptians during Hosni Mubarak’s 30-year rule. Saudi troops swiftly snuffed out anti-government protests in Bahrain, while Syria, Libya and Yemen descended into brutal civil wars.

The failure of the “Arab Spring” has many causes and varies by country. To maintain itself in power, the Assad regime, for instance, has been willing – with the aid of Russia and Iran – to inflict horrifying levels of death and destruction upon the Syrian people. Politically, this has led to what one UN official has [described](#) as the “Balkanisation” of the country. In Egypt, opposition to Mubarak splintered into left-wing and liberal activists, technocratic reformers and hardline Islamists. The commitment of President Mohamed Morsi, and his Muslim Brotherhood allies, to liberal democratic principles also proved sadly lacking. Perhaps most importantly, however, long-standing dictatorships throughout the region had effectively stifled the civic society institutions – including a free press and independent judiciary – upon which any successful democracy ultimately rests. But the economic, political and demographic causes of the “Arab Spring” remain unaddressed, as the protests which swept through Lebanon, Iraq and Algeria in 2019 underlined. Moreover, with oil prices low, pressures will continue to build on some of the regimes which have traditionally used those revenues to smother dissent and which were largely immune to the discontent of 2011.

Untouched by the Arab Spring, the prospects for reform in Saudi Arabia remain bleak. As well as participating in a disastrous war in Yemen, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman has, in the words of the [Washington Post](#), presided over “the most severe repression of dissent in modern Saudi history”. Alongside ordering the horrific murder of Jamal Khashoggi in 2018, the crown prince has – despite some initial and tentative early reforms – proved himself both autocratic and erratic. The arrest and torture of human rights activists and campaigners for women’s rights – together with the carrying out of mass

executions on drummed-up terrorist charges – shows the hollowness of the MBS’ claims of modernisation.

THE IRANIAN “ARC OF INFLUENCE” AND ITS LIMITS

Alongside the “Arab Spring”, Iranian expansionism has played a key role in reshaping the contours of the region. Over the past decade, Tehran has used the turmoil and fallout of 2011 to successfully carve out an “arc of influence” – known by the regime as the “axis of resistance” and dubbed by others the “Shia crescent” – which stretches from the Gulf of Oman across Iraq, Syria, Lebanon and to the Mediterranean coast. This goal was achieved not through overt military force but via proxies and militias – Hezbollah in Lebanon and Syria, the Popular Mobilisation Forces in Iraq, and the Houthis in Yemen. These forces have scant respect for human lives, rights or dignity. In March 2021, to pick just one recent example, the Houthis [detained](#) over 500 Ethiopian migrants into a single hangar with precious little access to water. When protests broke out about these appalling conditions, the Houthis reportedly beat those they believed were the ringleaders, locked the migrants in, and fired smoke grenades, leading to the deaths of over 40 people and injuring nearly 200.

The cost has come in the form of civil wars, vicious sectarianism and deep instability throughout the region. The emergence of a Shia-dominated, pro-Iranian government in Baghdad, for instance, stoked the Sunni resentment which helped fuel the rise of IS. In Syria, Iran utilised Shia forces – most notably Hezbollah, but also recruited from as far as Pakistan and Afghanistan – to retake territory from rebel forces and shore up the once-tottering Assad regime.

However, as the latest assessment from BICOM [details](#), Iran remains a potent threat. It continues to assist Hezbollah to entrench itself on the Syrian border by the Golan Heights and is working to help [convert](#) its Lebanon-based arsenal of 150,000 “dumb” missiles – those which do not have precision capability – so they are capable of accurately targeting Israeli towns, cities and critical infrastructure, including its nuclear reactor and the Haifa oil refinery. In Iraq, Iran is reportedly constructing hidden sites to store 600-mile ballistic missiles capable of hitting Israel and Saudi Arabia. And in Yemen, it is arming the Houthis with advanced weaponry which similarly threatens wider regional stability.

Thanks to the failure of the Trump administration’s “maximum pressure” campaign, the “breakout” time required by Iran to ramp up enrichment to produce enough fissile material for a nuclear weapon has been [sharply reduced](#) from one year under the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action. The new US administration places it as low as between three or four months. Despite Joe Biden’s attempts to re-engage Tehran in diplomacy, Iran has accelerated its breaches of the agreement – enriching more uranium to a greater purity than the 2015 deal allows and utilising more powerful centrifuges – while seeking to cut the access of International Atomic Energy Agency inspectors. In a further sign of Tehran’s belligerence – and despite renewed attempts by the US and UN to broker an end to the civil war in Yemen – the Houthis have been [allowed](#) to step up attacks on Saudi Arabia.

It is worth remembering that the Iranian threat is not confined to the Middle East. Tehran [appears](#) to be developing technology that might allow its ballistic missiles to reach parts of Europe. Over the past three decades, Hezbollah has carried out lethal terrorist attacks across the world – including in Paris, Buenos Aires and Burgas in Bulgaria – and planned many more. Indeed, in 2019, it was revealed that in 2015 the UK’s security services foiled a plot by Hezbollah to construct a bomb-making factory in London – the terrorists were allegedly stockpiling more ammonium nitrate than was used by Timothy McVeigh in the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing which killed 168 people – and appears to have been part of an international conspiracy stretching across several countries. Sometimes, Tehran does not even shelter behind its proxy killers: earlier this year, an Iranian diplomat was convicted of plotting to bomb a 2018 rally held in Paris by the Iranian opposition, which was attended by thousands of people, including a

number of British parliamentarians. In recent years, we have seen Tehran menace international shipping (including a British tanker in 2019) in the Strait of Hormuz, and effectively take hostage foreign citizens, including those with dual British nationality, holding them for years in appalling conditions on entirely trumped-up charges in order to increase their diplomatic leverage.

Aspects of Iranian power are, however, constructed on shaky grounds. The autumn of 2019 saw protests – born of a mixture of social, economic and political discontent – in Iran, Lebanon and Iraq which point to popular discontent with the status quo. While Tehran instituted a characteristically ruthless and bloody crackdown on the Iranian protesters, reporters in the country [assessed](#) that the unrest felt different – and more directly aimed at the legitimacy of the regime than previous uprisings in 2003, 2009 and 2011.

Although the sparks which set off the demonstrations in Iraq and Lebanon – and the contexts in which they took place – were different, they also shared important characteristics: chiefly the closed and corrupt nature of the political system. In both, too, demonstrations cut across sectarian divides: despite Baghdad’s Shia-dominated government, protests were strongest in Shia neighbourhoods. In Lebanon, the resignation of prime minister Saad Hariri did not sate public dissatisfaction at Hezbollah’s domination of the political system, a domination buttressed by its powerful militia and the backing of Iran, and protests spread to the terror group’s strongholds of Tyre and Nabatieth. This sense of Hezbollah’s waning grip on Lebanon’s Shia population was evident in a poll at the end of last year, which found that the percentage of Shia who say they have a “very positive” opinion of Hezbollah, while still a majority, is almost 20 points lower than it was in late 2017. “This trend almost certainly reflects increasing anger at Hezbollah’s role in the corruption, intimidation, and acute economic crisis plaguing the country, accelerated by its perceived responsibility for the devastating explosion in Beirut’s port last August,” [suggested](#) David Pollok of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy.

While the Lebanon protests rumbled on into 2020, those in power have used brute force to attempt to bring them to a halt: defying its reputation among the Shia masses as a champion of the oppressed, Hezbollah’s leadership sent its supporters into the streets to harass and attack demonstrators. In Iraq, pro-government Iranian-backed militias and the security forces [deployed](#) massive force and operated a “shoot to kill”, all directed by Tehran’s Revolutionary Guard Quds Force.

These protests graphically exposed the true character of the power structure which operates in Iran’s arc of influence. As Jonathan Spyer, director of the Middle East Centre for Reporting and Analysis, has [suggested](#): “Once the decorations, fictions and formalities are stripped away, the protesters are faced with an unelected, armed, utterly ruthless political-military structure which is the final decider and wielder of power in the country. This structure, in turn, is controlled from Iran, via the mechanism of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps.”

Moreover, it also underlines the myth of Tehran’s presentation of itself as leading a “an axis of resistance” to Israel and the West on behalf of the region’s oppressed peoples. “In reality,” Spyer argued, “the Iranian system most resembles a colonial one, in which the ability of local populations to decide for themselves disappears, and an Iran-controlled structure places itself in rule over them. This rule is then conducted in a manner intended to benefit Tehran, with indifference to the economic and other interests of the subject population.”

THE ABRAHAM ACCORDS AND BEYOND

Although the conclusion of the Abraham Accords was, in many regards, driven by the spectre of the Iranian threat and the desire to increase security cooperation – itself already conducted below the radar between Israel and the Gulf states for a number of years – the economic imperatives should not be overlooked. As a recent paper for the RAND corporation [suggested](#): “Although these accords represent a

major political breakthrough, our analysis suggests that they also represent a possible new chapter in the region's development—away from conflict and toward a shared vision of economic prosperity.” It assesses that, if these new relations evolve into deeper economic integration, over a ten-year period, Israel, Bahrain, the UAE, Sudan and Morocco could reap huge dividends, including the creation of 180,000 new jobs. The total economic value could be around \$150bn. If the accords were to expand to some of the 10 or so other countries that have been mentioned – such as Saudi Arabia, Oman and Indonesia – the benefits swell to over 4 million new jobs and more than \$1tn in new economic activity over a decade.

The rhetorical promise of greater ties in the fields of investment, tourism, direct flights, security, telecommunications, technology, energy, healthcare, culture, and the environment, is already beginning to bear fruit and stands in contrast with the rather wary, chilly peace conducted between Israel and Egypt over four decades ago. This is not entirely unsurprising: as David Horowitz, editor of the Times of Israel, noted last summer: “The UAE is our first peace partner with whom we do not have a bloody history. Our ties are not being established over shared memories of war and loss. The forging of our alliance is less emotionally dramatic, less fraught, less militarily important. In short, more normal.”

But this should not blind us to some of the startling developments which – even amid the global pandemic – have occurred over recent months. In March, a new \$10bn Israel-UAE investment fund – focused on the energy, manufacturing, healthcare, water and agriculture sectors and designed to boost regional economic cooperation between the two countries – was announced. Some of the projects reportedly under consideration – for instance, a deep water port in the Gulf of Eilat/Aqaba, which will create a new shipping and railway trade route between the Persian Gulf and Europe – underline the scale of the potential ambition and opportunities for the region and beyond. It also indicates the degree to which the Gulf states view Israel – the famed “start-up” nation and innovation superpower – as a crucial economic partner as they become less dependent on oil revenues and seek new opportunities for investment.

Consider, too, that, despite intermittent lockdowns and tight travel restrictions, since mid-October when the first commercial flights between the two countries were established, more than 130,000 Israelis have visited the UAE. The significance of this was underlined by the New York Times' Thomas Friedman, who argued: “Unlike the peace breakthroughs between Israel and Egypt, Israel and Lebanon's Christians and Israel and Jordan, which were driven from the top and largely confined there, the openings between Israel and the Gulf States – while initiated from the top to build an alliance against Iran – are now being driven even more from the bottom, by tourists, students and businesses.” Indeed, polling suggests that public support for ties with Israel increased markedly in both the UAE and Saudi Arabia in the months after the signing of the Accords.

The agreement between Israel and Sudan which followed last October may not pack the same economic punch, but it was symbolically and psychologically important. Sudan – unlike the UAE and Bahrain – has been to war with the country. During Israel's 1948 War of Independence, it dispatched six army companies to join Egypt in attempting to wipe out the new Jewish state. In 1967, Sudan again sent a small contingent of troops to assist Egypt. And, of course, Khartoum was the site from which, in the wake of that conflict, the Arab League gathered and issued its infamous three no's: no peace with Israel, no recognition of Israel, no negotiations with Israel – that gives last year's news an important symbolic significance.

Other normalisation agreements both in the region – for instance, with Oman and possibly even Qatar – and in the wider Muslim world may now follow on. Clearly, for Israel, Saudi Arabia – which is believed to have quietly encouraged the UAE, Bahrain and Sudan – but has not yet established its own diplomatic relations – remains the big prize. This is understandably intertwined with the stalled Israeli-Palestinian

peace process and the desire of some in the Saudi ruling class to adhere to the principles of the 2002 Arab Peace Initiative.

The upsurge in violence in recent weeks was a graphic reminder, if any was needed, that it would be a mistake to assume, as the previous US administration appeared at times to believe, that the Palestinians' legitimate right to self-determination and statehood can be separated from the process of regional détente. Equally, neither Israel nor the wider Arab world can accept a Palestinian veto which stops the process in its tracks. Ramallah's initial response to the Abraham Accords – severing relations with the UAE and Bahrain, and attempting without success to rally the Arab League in condemnation – proved ultimately futile. It also failed to recognise, as Dennis Ross, a former peace process adviser to the Clinton and Obama administrations, [suggested](#), that the UAE's demand of Israel – that it suspend its plans to annex parts of the West Bank – helped to “preserve the option for a two-state solution”.

President Abbas' more recent steps last winter – restoring relations with the UAE and Bahrain and resuming civil and security ties with Israel – suggest that, in the wake of a change of administration in Washington, the Palestinian Authority intends to adopt a more pragmatic attitude. Indeed, writing in [Foreign Affairs magazine](#) earlier this year, two of the president's advisers on negotiations with Israel, Hussein Agha and Ahmad Samih Khalidi, suggested that the normalisation agreements required a rethink in Palestinian thinking. “It is plain that the Palestinians need a new approach—one founded on a reconsidered strategic vision and recalibrated aspiration,” Agha and Khalidi suggested. “It must redefine the Palestinian notion of sovereignty, review Palestinian views of security, and refrain from shirking responsibility or indulging in threats that are not credible.” They argued that “the prospects of securing ‘hard’ sovereignty, based on nineteenth-century notions of the nation-state, with full and complete control over land, borders, and resources, are remote.” Instead, they noted, “under soft sovereignty, border security arrangements would need to be trilateral in both the West Bank (Jordanian, Israeli, and Palestinian) and Gaza (Egyptian, Israeli, and Palestinian).”

On the Israeli side, supporters of a two-state solution rightly recognise that normalisation and the goal of a Palestinian state aren't alternatives but entirely complementary. Koby Huberman, co-founder of the Israeli Regional Initiative Group, has [called](#) for “the new objective” to be a “regional roadmap towards implementing a negotiated regional package deal with the two-state solution at its core”. The diplomatic process, he argues, should be “revised, in order to allow for a gradual, reciprocal, partial and parallel progress in both the Israeli-Palestinian track and the Israeli-Arab states track”, while the Palestinians should be offered “a fresh political horizon” to provide them with “reasonable clarity that the two-state solution is the endgame of the roadmap”.

The confluence of these positive developments presents an important opportunity for supporters of a two-state solution. As David Makovsky has [outlined](#), a “win-win-win” strategy based on gradualism (the principle underpinning the Oslo Accords) and a rejection of unilateralism (whether it be from Israel or the Palestinians) could allow regional developments to bring benefits to Israelis and Palestinians alike. “This is not a strategy of linkage, by which Washington somehow conditions its support for the growth of Israel's Arab ties on Israeli concessions to Palestinians,” he argues. Instead, it is one where “US efforts to expand Israel-Arab normalisation proceed in parallel with progress between Jerusalem and Ramallah.” As Makovsky correctly notes, such an approach would command broad-based support among the Israeli public: a poll taken in the immediate aftermath of the deal, [showed](#) nearly 80 percent of Israelis preferring normalisation with the UAE to annexation of parts of the West Bank, which commanded the support of only 16.5 percent of voters.

Hamas' rule in Gaza clearly represents a major obstacle to peace. It threatens the security of the people of Israel and it has left the people of Gaza facing a dire humanitarian situation with basic necessities – like electricity and clean drinking water – in short supply and poverty and unemployment eye-wateringly high. As Biden rightly recognised after last month's fighting, the people of Gaza should not pay the price

for Hamas' actions so it is vital that the international community rallies behind the president's call for a "massive" reconstruction package. That aid, as Biden also suggested, must not fall into the hands of Hamas. Instead, the international community must also provide Israel with the security and reassurance it needs by working to ensure the disarmament of Hamas, thus honouring the Oslo Accords' requirement that the Palestinian territories be demilitarised. Moreover, the disarmament of Hamas is the crucial prerequisite to restoring the legitimate authority of the PA and Abbas in Gaza.

Enhanced support for the PA must also be accompanied with a concerted international effort to persuade Abbas to undertake important reform. In return for increased international aid and support, it must end its policy of [inciting violence](#) and glorifying terrorism. It needs to clean up its school curriculum – which, for instance, teaches young children the virtues of martyrdom – and stop its pernicious practice of paying "salaries" to terrorists serving time in Israeli prisons. And the delayed Palestinian elections must also be rescheduled.

More widely, a reinvigorated political track to the peace process must be complemented by renewed investment in the civic society and economic dimensions. The Middle East Partnership for Peace Act, passed by the US Congress last December with strong cross-party backing, will deliver \$250m over the next five years to projects that support peace-building efforts in Israel-Palestine. LFI has campaigned on behalf of the fund for the past five years. This campaign has been met with warm words by the UK government but little by way of concrete action. As ALLMEP's John Lyndon and Huda Abuarquob detail in their contribution to this publication, the new US legislation leaves open the door to other international actors both donating to it and participating in its governance. Indeed, as originally envisaged by the ALLMEP, the US, Europe, the Arab world and private sectors would be equal partners in the fund. Sadly, at the very moment when US leadership – perhaps in combination with the dynamics unleashed by the Abraham Accords – provides the opportunity to realise this vision, the UK government appears to have opted to sit on the side lines and refuse to engage in any meaningful sense. Once again, the rhetoric and reality of "Global Britain" remain worlds apart. More broadly, indeed, the fact that the government's new strategic review makes no mention at all of the Abraham Accords underlines the narrowness of its vision for the UK's role in the world and the region. Britain's deep and historic links with parties across the Middle East could and should allow it to partner with the US and others in helping to advance the vital process of normalisation.

CONCLUSION: PRINCIPLES FOR A PROGRESSIVE FOREIGN POLICY

With a general election still several years away, Labour does not need a detailed prescription for how in government it would handle every issue facing the region. It should, however, adopt a series of principles as it begins to develop its thinking. These might include:

- ◆ Support democratic forces and values in the region and the development of the civic society institutions – including a vibrant media, independent judiciary and free trade unions – which underpin, and are a vital prerequisite to, successfully functioning democracies.
- ◆ Adopt a policy of consistency – supporting the rights of oppressed groups throughout the region, whether women in Saudi Arabia, journalists in Egypt, Palestinian political activists or the LGBT community in Iran – with equal passion and commitment.
- ◆ Approach the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians in an even-handed, fair and proportionate manner. Encourage both sides to avoid unilateral steps which damage the prospects of a two-state solution. Develop policy responses which outline constructive steps to improve the situation on the ground whilst always recognising that a resolution to the conflict ultimately requires direct negotiations between the two parties.

- ◆ Deploy Britain's soft power – including a restored international aid budget – to support peacebuilding efforts in the region. Britain can and must be a force for good in the world. In the spirit of the historic tradition of Labour internationalism, we must always remember and defend the positive role the UK can and should play in the Middle East.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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COUNTERING THE THREAT FROM IRAN

MICHAEL HERZOG

It isn't just Iran's nuclear ambitions that pose an acute challenge - so too does its regional expansionism and ballistic missile programme.

The Middle East has long been known for chronic instability and for exporting it to the west. However, the decade of turmoil we have just witnessed, that started with the "Arab Spring", was unprecedented. The political unrest has devastated states, deposed rulers, spilled the blood of hundreds of thousands of people, and sent waves of refugees and violence into Europe.

Iran is prominent among the drivers of regional instability. Unlike other destabilising actors, such as the jihadi groups (Islamic State, al-Qaida), it is a powerful state actor with significant capabilities that pursues nuclear and regional ambitions and cultivates armed proxies, equipping them with advanced weapons including huge arsenals of rockets. For Israel, Iran represents the primary national security threat, given its combination of ambition, capabilities and hostile ideology that openly calls for the Jewish state's destruction.

Since the Islamic revolution in 1979, Iran has been governed by a regime combining religious and political powers ("church and state") in the hands of a supreme leader, an ayatollah. This system is based on regime founder Ayatollah Khomeini's concept of the "guardianship of the jurist" ("Vilayat e-Faqih"), that imparts the high religious authority with political power. The supreme leader dominates state affairs pertaining to law and order, internal stability, defence, foreign policy and economic affairs, through strong religious and military-security establishments, the most important of which is the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). This regime is characterised by repression and basic violations of human rights at home; sectarianism and power projection in the region; and deep ideological hostility towards the west and Israel.

At the core of the Iranian threat are three sets of challenges: its nuclear programme; its regional agenda; and its missile programmes.

IRAN'S NUCLEAR AMBITIONS

In the nuclear field, Iran's current goal is to become a nuclear threshold state, capable of swiftly crossing the threshold towards nuclear weapons at the time of its choosing, without being stopped by the international community. Iran was indeed moving directly towards a weapon until 2003, when it was exposed and stopped by the international community and forced to change course. While the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) significantly rolled back Iran's nuclear programme, it did so only for 10-15 years. Following that period, most limitations on Iran's programme are lifted by a series of "sunset" clauses. At that point Iran is permitted to enrich on an industrial scale to levels higher than the low enriched uranium required for civilian power, using highly sophisticated centrifuges, and without the international community having the authority to thoroughly monitor the programme as a whole. In addition, Iranian missiles capable of carrying nuclear weapons are prohibited only by a weak UN Security Council Resolution (2231), which has been ignored by Iran and will in any case expire in October 2023. Finally, Iran's secret nuclear archive seized by Israel in 2018, exposed undeclared nuclear sites and activities related to Possible Military Dimensions (PMD) of the nuclear programme. It highlights the fact that the closing of the examination of those potential military aspects by the International Atomic Energy Agency in 2015 was premature.

It is for these reasons that the Biden administration, supported by the European Union and the “E3” (Britain, France and Germany), aspires not only to return to the original JCPOA but to push from there towards a “longer and stronger” deal. However, if the US and its European allies fail to persuade or compel an obstinate Iran to move beyond the original deal (as is widely expected across the Middle East), then the unfolding sunsets will allow Iran to ultimately become a nuclear threshold state. Such a development is unbearable for many in the region, including Israel and the major Gulf states. Letting Tehran reach the threshold would further heighten instability throughout the region and is highly likely to trigger a nuclear arms race, in which Saudi Arabia and possibly other regional powers would seek to match Iranian capabilities.

Diplomacy is no doubt the preferred tool in dealing with this challenge, but for it to work in the face of a defiant actor playing an escalating game of brinkmanship (including its most recent announcement of unprecedented uranium enrichment to 60 percent, one grade below military level), the US administration, supported by European allies, should maintain pressure and build deterrence. Their policies towards Iran should include significant disincentives alongside the incentives offered in the negotiations.

EXPLOITING REGIONAL TURMOIL

In the Middle East, Iran has been seeking first and foremost to exploit the turmoil that has swept across the region since the Arab Spring, filling the power vacuums and establishing itself as the dominant power. Granted legitimacy by the JCPOA and emboldened by its role in turning the tide against the Islamic State, Iran embarked around 2016 on a long-term strategic project to create a contiguous zone of direct influence spanning historical Mesopotamia (where Iran strives for domination and targets the US military presence) and the Levant toward the Mediterranean – the so-called Iranian “land bridge”. These efforts have been based on an active presence on-the-ground, directly and through proxies; influence over weakened and dependent governments in Iraq, Syria and Lebanon; the development of military infrastructure; domestic subversion in these theatres; and initiatives to expand economic leverage.

An important part of Iran’s strategy has been to entrench itself militarily in war-torn Syria. It uses that territory as a link to the Mediterranean and to Hezbollah in Lebanon – Iran’s most potent proxy – and to build it into a formidable military front facing Israel. For Iran, a Syrian front with Israel is intended to extend and reinforce the Lebanese front established over decades through Hezbollah, which is [equipped](#) (according to Israeli intelligence estimates) with around 130,000 missiles, rockets and mortars. The enormous scale of Hezbollah’s arsenal exceeds that of most militaries.

Moreover, in recent years Iran launched the “[precision project](#)”, designed to upgrade at least 1,000 of Hezbollah’s medium to long-range rockets into highly accurate, GPS-guided ones. Such an arsenal would enable Hezbollah to present Israel with a serious strategic threat. With Israel’s major population centres and critical national and military infrastructure located within a small area, a relatively low number of precision rockets could severely threaten Israel’s ability to fight. Sensing the gravity of the threat, Israel launched its own military campaign to push back against the most critical elements of Iranian military [entrenchment in Syria](#), first among them the “precision project”. Israel’s campaign has not been able to uproot Iran militarily from Syria, but it did manage to thwart important parts of Tehran’s plans without escalating to war.

Another focus of Iran’s destabilising regional activities lies in the Gulf, and the strategic straits of Bab al-Mandab and Hormuz. Iran has engaged in subversion, especially against Saudi Arabia (including massive missile and drone attacks on major Saudi oil fields, which remained unanswered) and in

Bahrain (over 70 percent of whose inhabitants are Shiites). In recent years, it invested heavily in turning the Houthi rebels (who hail from an off-shoot of Shiite Islam) in north-west Yemen into Iranian proxies. It equipped them with missiles, rockets and armed drone capabilities and encouraged them to target Saudi Arabia and the UAE. It could use the Houthis or their territory to threaten maritime transportation approaching Bab al-Mandab, and even Israel. Houthi senior officials [publicly bragged](#) of having a “bank” of Israeli targets, both at land and sea.

The hybrid conflict between Iran and Israel has expanded in recent years and escalated to trading direct blows. It encompasses Iran's nuclear programme, which Iran blames Israel for sabotaging, while vowing revenge. It extends to the cyber sphere, with Iran attacking Israel's water infrastructure and Israel reportedly hitting an Iranian port in response. It includes a front in Syria and Lebanon, especially over Iran's attempts to deploy precision-guided missiles that can target Israeli critical infrastructure. It involves Iran deploying rockets to proxies to threaten Israel not only in Lebanon and Gaza but also in Yemen and Iraq. It now also embraces the maritime sphere, with reports of Israel sabotaging Iranian ships carrying weapons or oil to Syria, and Iran targeting Israeli-owned ships in the Gulf. While both sides have no interest in a major escalation, the potential for such escalation cannot be ignored.

In pursuit of its regional hegemonic ambitions, Iran has cultivated armies of proxies – mostly Shiites or Shiite off-shoots, from Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Afghanistan and Pakistan – and has fostered partnership, collaboration and support with additional armed groups in Syria, the Gaza Strip, Western Sahara and more. In total, Iranian regional proxies number several hundred thousand fighters. Some, like Hezbollah and groups in Iraq, are not merely militias but thanks to Iran have the capabilities of regular military forces. Others, like the Popular Mobilisation Units in Iraq (“al-Hashd ash-Sha’bi”) acquired local state sponsorship while answering to Iran.

The recent round of armed conflict between Israel and Islamist armed groups in Gaza – in which the latter fired over 4,000 rockets and mortars at Israel - highlighted Iran's regional destabilising role. In this round, Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad (an extreme, militant group closely affiliated with Iran) boasted a huge arsenal of rockets, most of which had been produced indigenously with Iranian knowhow, guidance, and support. These groups take open pride in that during the fighting they maintained real-time, ongoing communication with the IRGC and other members of the Iranian-led "axis of resistance".

The most important arm shaping and implementing Iran's strategy beyond its borders is the IRGC's Quds Force. This unit, commanding around 10,000 personnel, enjoys significant independence and carries weight beyond its numbers, [dominating regional policies](#) far beyond any other Iranian agency. The targeting of its iconic leader, Qassem Suleimani, by the US in January 2020, dealt a severe blow to Tehran, yet the Quds Force continues to lead Iran's regional operations under his replacement, General Esmail Qaani.

Several years ago, senior Iranian officials boasted that Iran effectively controls four Arab capitals: Baghdad, Damascus, Beirut and Sana'a. Since then, however, Iran has experienced setbacks. First, the Trump administration's “maximum pressure” sanctions campaign forced Iran to cut funding to its proxies. According to Israeli Intelligence, Iran slashed financial support to Hezbollah, which was approaching \$1bn a year, by about 40 percent. Second, as noted, Israel launched a relatively successful campaign against Iran's military entrenchment in Syria. Third, other regional actors pushed back in other ways, for example, Morocco severed diplomatic relations over Iranian meddling in Western Sahara. Fourth, Iran and its proxies have encountered growing popular protest in Iraq and Lebanon, where serious socioeconomic difficulties have prompted resentment at Iran's dominant role. In these theatres, Iran and its proxies are increasingly blamed, even within the Shiite community, for local troubles, such as the economic meltdown in Lebanon. Finally, in Iran itself there has been widespread criticism of the regime for investing in regional power projection at the expense of urgent domestic priorities, against the

backdrop of severe sanctions. While these factors have not reversed Iran's regional agenda, they have made it more difficult to execute.

With the renewal of Western diplomatic engagement with Iran, regional actors are calling on the US and its European allies to weigh the potential lifting of heavy sanctions not only in the context of the nuclear talks, but also in the regional context. That means taking into account that the premature release of funds to Iran would enable it to increase funding for destabilising regional activities. Some regional actors therefore favour expanding negotiations with Iran to include the regional dimension either directly or through a parallel track, possibly involving regional stakeholders.

Israel is of a different opinion. Since it regards the nuclear file as the most critical issue, it does not want it overloaded. It fears that any quest for a "grand bargain" will increase the likelihood of failure or may result in unwarranted trade-offs (including pressure on Israel to curb its anti-Iranian activities in Syria). In Israel's eyes, Tehran's regional threats should be countered primarily on the ground, rather than being negotiated or given a pass for fear of undermining a nuclear settlement, as was the case following the signing of the JCPOA.

IRAN'S MISSILE PROGRAMME: A VITAL TOOL OF POWER PROJECTION

Iran's missile programme is also a source of major concern. This programme combines the nuclear and the regional dimensions of the Iranian threat. Missiles would serve as the main delivery system for a nuclear weapon. At the same time, missiles, rockets and, increasingly, armed drones are proliferated by Iran as a central tool in its regional power projection. Iran has the largest and most diverse missile arsenal in the Middle East, with hundreds of ballistic and cruise missiles capable of flying beyond 2000km. In fact, Iran is considered the only country internationally to develop such long-range missiles without first having a nuclear weapons capability. In order to keep its missile programme out of the JCPOA's limitations, Iran voluntarily agreed to limit the range of its ballistic missiles to 2000km – threatening Israel and large parts of the Gulf, but not most of Europe and beyond. It is, however, developing the technology (including through its space programme) to manufacture long-range ballistic and inter-continental missiles capable of covering the whole of Europe and possibly reaching the US.

CONCLUSION

These three dimensions of the Iranian challenge – the nuclear, regional and missile programmes – are designed to reinforce one another. Iranian nuclear capabilities are meant to provide a strategic umbrella for proxies' conventional capabilities and subdue regional rivals, while Hezbollah's rocket arsenal was amassed, among other things, to deter Israel from striking the Iranian nuclear programme.

The Iranian challenge requires the west to develop a comprehensive strategic response that considers all dimensions of the threat. As the US and its European allies enter nuclear diplomacy with Iran, they ought to be mindful of the regional picture and factor it into their deliberations with Iran – even if each of these dimensions is treated separately and differentially.

An integrated western strategy should not rely merely on diplomatic and economic tools, while neglecting cyber, military (as a last resort) and other potential options. Incentives should be balanced by credible disincentives that create and maintain deterrence. A successful long-term and integrated approach also calls for strategic patience, close consultations with regional actors directly and strategically impacted by Iran and viewing the new development towards Israeli-Arab normalisation as an asset. Failing to develop such a comprehensive approach will likely encourage Iran to raise the stakes of brinkmanship and ultimately pour more fuel on the regional fire.

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REGIONAL SOLUTIONS TO REGIONAL CHALLENGES

MORAN ZAGA

The Abraham Accords could bring economic, environmental and strategic benefits to the Middle East - and reshape attitudes.

Will [the Abraham Accords](#) reshape the region? This question is at the heart of many discussions following the historic agreement concluded between Israel and the United Arab Emirates, which was followed by treaties with Bahrain, Sudan and Morocco. Since the signing of these agreements, there have been many new collaborations in almost every field, from diplomacy and security to the economy and civic society sectors. While it is premature to assess the wider ramifications of these new ties, it is not too soon to start examining the solutions they bring to long-standing regional challenges. This paper analyses the major opportunities that these alliances offer on the immediate, strategic and cognitive dimensions.

ECONOMIC BENEFITS AND BEYOND

Israel, the UAE, Bahrain, Sudan and Morocco entered these new alliances from different standpoints. Each country had its own interests, challenges and political standing that played a role in their motivations for formalising full diplomatic relations. Israel's motivation to engage with Arab states derives from an obvious and understandable desire to bolster its legitimacy within the Middle East. These accords serve this purpose by moving beyond mere recognition to showing a willingness to consider Israel as a partner. The UAE wanted to expand its influence in the region across a wider field of issues. This game-changing step positioned the UAE as a central actor in the Middle East in the eyes of the international community. For Bahrain, the new alliance strengthens its security position and expands its strategic axis against Iran. Morocco gained a political victory for its desire to see its sovereignty in Western Sahara more widely recognised. And Sudan was removed from the US State Department's list of terrorist states. Thus all the signatories found an immediate national benefit from the agreements.

With the exception of Sudan, which entered the agreement with Israel from a weaker position, each of the countries enjoy economic stability and they are well-positioned within the global economy. Israel's challenge has long been its isolation from its regional neighbours and thus its relative economic isolation. Although Israel engaged in trade and business with these countries prior to the agreements, these were limited in scale and faced multiple difficulties. Official diplomatic relations thus opened a new door for Israel's economy. According to a Rand report published this spring, these ties could offer an immediate boost to the economy of the four signatories by creating approximately 150,000 new jobs. Looking ahead, an optimistic scenario, based on a deepening of regional economic ties and integration, might lead to an [additional \\$1tn in economic activity](#) over a decade.

The UAE, especially, is a key economic hub, which attracts many international companies and shipments owing to its [free trade zones and tax advantages](#). This relatively new market for Israel is generating a great deal of interest, but it is also entering a highly competitive economic landscape. Jebel Ali seaport, for instance, is ranked the busiest in the Middle East, and Israeli commodities were among the first exchanges between the countries. By January 2021, less than six months after the agreements, [trade between Israel and Dubai](#) had topped \$270m, (this excludes the other six emirates). Yet, it is important to note that the attractiveness and scope of trade between Israel and the UAE is greater than that between Israel, Bahrain and, of course, Sudan.

Beyond trade, bilateral ties offer the opportunity to tackle significant social and environmental regional challenges, such as climate change, desertification and food security. This is where Israel's thriving hi-tech industry and R&D centres could play a major role in reshaping the region. The UAE and Bahrain have made major investments to bring state-of-the-art technologies to their countries to develop these sectors, but they are still lagging behind in research centres and enhancing domestic know-how. Israel's national Netafim water company, Mekorot, has signed a [\\$3m deal with Bahrain](#) "to share knowledge on water technology" in seawater and brackish water desalination, automatic control systems for water stations, and water-resource management. Likewise, Israeli irrigation company Netafim has opened an office in the UAE to provide smart irrigation tools and services, while Israeli firm Watergen has signed a [preliminary agreement](#) with Abu Dhabi-based agriculture company Al Dahra on heat-exchange technology which produces water from the air.

All Middle Eastern countries are struggling to shift to renewable energies and sustainable ecosystems, but, with the wider network of knowledge arising from the normalisation process, we might see a technological leap forward in the next few years. Indeed, the decision to locate the IRENA (International Renewable Energy Agency) headquarters and international offices in Abu Dhabi since 2016 signals a growing awareness and desire to address, and offer leadership on, this regional issue. Even before the Abraham Accords, Israel's IRENA office in Abu Dhabi has offered a significant meeting point between the country, the UAE and the rest of the Arab world on the subject of renewables. It is clear that the overt and official relations will now facilitate larger and more meaningful collaborations in the field of renewable and clean energy.

In the realms of tourism, property investment, finance, national security and other fields, we are already seeing new economic ties bearing fruit. The covid-19 pandemic has also clearly demonstrated the merits of normalisation as the countries supported each other with medical equipment, research and coordination. Only three days after the agreement to establish full diplomatic ties between Israel and the UAE was announced, a joint [Israeli-Emirati covid research project](#) aimed at developing a rapid test was concluded. Covid-19 has taken its toll on tourism in the Middle East, as elsewhere. Yet, thanks to its "open gates" policy, and the desire of excited Israelis to visit anew destination only three hours away, Dubai has been flooded with [tens of thousands of Israeli visitors](#), contributing both to UAE's tourism and to Israel's national mood. Clearly, this initial special phase in the relationship between the countries indicates the emergence of a warm peace unlike the earlier diplomatic agreements Israel concluded with Egypt in the late 1970s and Jordan in the mid-1990s (although, Israeli-Jordanian relations began positively and later soured).

RESHAPING THE BALANCE OF POWER

The Abraham Accords have brought immediate benefits for the countries party to them, but more significant are the strategic implications for the whole region. The emerging alliance between Israel, the UAE, Bahrain and Morocco, and to some extent Sudan, will reshape the balance of power in the Middle East and introduce a new set of dynamics to regional diplomacy and security.

Israel and the Arab Gulf states share common security threats, chief among them Iran's nuclear project and its involvement, and support for, overseas terrorism. The shifting US policies towards Iran, and the noninterventionist US policy in the Middle East, have caused [great concern in the region](#) and are central foreign policy priorities. The construction of a larger coalition comprising the UAE, Bahrain and Israel can strengthen deterrence against Iran on the security level and bolster diplomatic efforts. This coalition can, in turn, contribute to the work of other Arab Gulf states that are not part of the Abraham Accords. On the covert level, this unofficial coalition can act jointly, more efficiently and with greater legitimacy against Iran's militias and proxies which operate far beyond the Islamic republic's borders in Iraq, Yemen, Syria, Lebanon, and in the maritime zone of the Gulf. Another strategic development was the [expiration of the](#)

[international arms embargo](#) on Iran in October 2020. Although the EU's bar on weapons' sales remains in place, this new legal situation has [raised tensions in the region](#) and the anxieties of policymakers.

In addition to the traditional Sunni-Shiite rift and Iran's increasingly hawkish nuclear policy and regional expansionism, the last decade has witnessed a disturbing degree of instability in the region. The Arab Spring, the transnational violent ideology of Islamic State, civil wars in Syria, Yemen and Libya, mass migration, and Turkey's belligerent policy in the Mediterranean signalled that the wide range of threats and conflicting forces that endanger the future development and prosperity of Middle Eastern countries. The Abraham Accords were linked to the US' sale of F-35 fighter jets to the UAE and to other [deals between the signatories for security technologies](#), from cyber to advanced weaponry. Investment in national security is strategically important for this new alliance's deterrence against regional threats, especially with the weakening of the US defence umbrella in the Middle East. Yet, arms deals in the Middle East [also draw criticism](#), and they cannot offer a genuine answer to domestic challenges.

Beyond its security goals, the Abraham Accords also open up new diplomatic opportunities. The increase in countries normalising their relations with Israel and its expanding role in the Arab world provides a smoother path for other Arab countries to put their relationships with Israel on a new footing. Saudi Arabia's quiet support for the UAE and Bahrain following the Abraham Accords indicates a neutral stance and perhaps even a green light for its own talks with Israel. Saudi Arabia's powerful position in the Middle East and the Muslim world makes it the ultimate partner for Israel. Although the Saudis still insist a resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict must be a precondition to full normalisation, there are many intermediate steps which could be taken. Indeed, the fluidity of the term normalisation is demonstrated by the Saudis' [decision in August 2020](#) to open their airspace to Israeli aircraft. Another, but by no means the only, strategic dimension to the accords is the potential for renewed Israeli-Palestinian negotiations. Normalisation enables a greater role for the Arab world in advancing Israeli-Palestinian peace under different political circumstances. The Palestinians opposed the Abraham Accords, but they [do not reject](#) the 2002 Arab Peace Initiative, which Morocco, Bahrain and the UAE support. This initiative could serve as a common ground for talks which would also include Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Jordan. While previous negotiations included western arbitrators, a new pathway to peace can now be initiated and brokered through local and regional actors who support both Israeli and Palestinian interests.

SHIFTING ATTITUDES

Israel, the UAE, Bahrain and Morocco are considered to embody a moderate approach that prioritises pragmatism over ideological considerations. This approach strengthens the forces opposed to extremism and religious radicalism in the region. Beyond its strategic significance, this changes the balance in the Middle East in favour of moderate voices. The 9/11 attacks and the later rise of Islamic State traumatised the region and triggered the rise of voices opposed to radicalism and extremism. Many countries struggle to offer a sociopolitical response, both to the young Arabs within their borders and to the international community beyond to improve their image worldwide. The UAE and Bahrain are the most determined Gulf states to delegitimise political Islam (especially the Muslim Brotherhood). This also reflects Israel's worldview.

One important tool for the Arab Gulf states to utilise is the promotion of religious tolerance. A policy of tolerance discourages extremism and sectarianism within Islam and encourages the acceptance of other faiths. The second objective is contributing to [thriving interfaith relations](#) between Jews and Muslims in the UAE and Bahrain, prior to and, especially, after the Abraham Accords. Side-stepping divisive issues – such as attitudes towards Zionism in general and Israel in particular – the UAE, Bahrain and Morocco stress the concept of a shared Abrahamic heritage as a common ground between Jews and Muslims. Thus religion supports increased people-to-people relations.

Within Israel, Muslim-Jewish relations form a domestic sociopolitical challenge as well. Prolonged political delegitimation of the Arab parties in the Knesset has exacerbated religious tensions, tensions which are fuelled by the continuing Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Therefore, the increasing Jewish-Muslim dialogue that is facilitated by the Gulf states and by Jewish organisations that embrace this opportunity offers new hope for reconciliation also within Israel. Islam's holy sites in Israel could also draw religious tourism. The development of Muslim tourism in Israel provides a symbolic resonance and opportunity to shift attitudes that far exceeds its economic value. Israel's tourism sector is now [seeking new opportunities](#) to encourage for Muslim visitors from around the Middle East and this signals a deep shift in Israelis' attitude towards Muslims and Islam.

There are many further areas for [people-to-people collaboration](#), including initiatives for youth dialogue, environmental projects and women's empowerment. The emerging civic dialogue between Israelis, Emiratis, Bahrainis and Moroccans is also evident on social media platforms and is expanding to other nationalities in the Arab world. Thus, the Abraham Accords herald a significant event that contributes to a more positive regional outlook and discourse, in addition to its many bilateral and strategic benefits.

These civic and social developments show a gradual increase in liberal and democratic principles. For Israel, the rapprochement with the Muslim community at home and in the region enhances pluralism and, as we are already seeing, enables a deeper participation of Arab parties in its domestic politics. For the UAE and Bahrain, the interaction with Israelis on the people-to-people level could cultivate a layer of civil society which is only yet in its early stages. This trend could result in greater liberalisation in the Arab Gulf states – serving as an example for other Arab societies to follow.

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A NEW TRANSATLANTIC TOOL FOR PEACEBUILDING BETWEEN ISRAELIS AND PALESTINIANS

JOHN LYNDON and HUDA ABUARQUOUB

An International Fund for Israeli-Palestinian Peace could have the same transformative impact on the conflict as the International Fund for Ireland did in the 1990s. And new US legislation provides a framework and \$250m in investment over the coming five years.

Mark Twain is reputed to have coined the phrase: “history doesn’t repeat itself, but it often rhymes.” Equally, no two intractable conflicts where territory, identity and historical narratives play a dominant role are exactly the same. But they often rhyme, and the human beings at the centre of them—be they Arabs and Jews, or Catholics and Protestants—are fundamentally identical, responding in very similar ways to the events roiling around them.

In the 1990s, we had an unusual coincidence of two starkly different theories of conflict resolution being applied to two similarly intractable conflicts. In Israel and Palestine and in Northern Ireland, we had two peace processes with deep US engagement and leadership. We also had two parallel sets of populations with seemingly irresolvable claims and narratives, and deep misgivings of the intentions and reliability of their adversaries, following generations of bloodshed and mistrust. Yet, three decades on from those diplomatic processes, Northern Ireland enjoys an imperfect and fragile peace, with the institutions and ideas that the Good Friday Agreement put in place intact and nationalists and unionists sharing power democratically, and the threat of violence—always present—receding to levels that previous generations could only dream of. While at the same time, 3,000 miles away, the architecture of the Oslo Accords is – as we tragically witnessed in recent weeks – in ruins, and Israelis and Palestinians are more divided and hostile toward one another than perhaps ever before.

There are many variables that explain this discrepancy. The very different role of the US as mediator; the failure of both Israelis and Palestinians to implement important parts of the Oslo Accords; and the role of spoiler actors on both sides who were committed to using violence to overturn them each played a critical part. One additional variable, however, receives comparatively little attention, and it speaks to the qualitative difference between the Oslo Accords and the Good Friday Agreement. Both essentially interim agreements, the former appeared out of nowhere, shocking the world, as well as Israelis and Palestinians, with no civic preparation or grassroots capacity ready to sustain it. While the latter was the conclusion to more than a decade of radically scaled investment in civil society and grassroots peacebuilders, who themselves formed core parallel constituencies demanding that their leaders took risks to achieve peace, even designing much of its political architecture. Learning this lesson from Northern Ireland, if no other, is key to understanding how real conflict resolution can be achieved for Israelis and Palestinians.

THE GOOD FRIDAY AGREEMENT’S “GREAT UNSUNG HERO”

At the very centre of that story is the International Fund for Ireland (IFI). Starting 12 years before a peace agreement, it built the foundations and civic capacity that successful diplomacy needs, with the UK’s chief negotiator Jonathan Powell calling it “the great unsung hero” of the Good Friday Agreement.

The IFI began its work in the late 1980s, when Northern Ireland's Troubles were far more violent than the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is today. Once started, it catalysed a sustained, long-term effort to build relationships, economic development, interdependencies and trust between unionists and nationalists, cementing the gains achieved even as rejectionists attempted to push back against progress. Most importantly, through the IFI, the international community provided the backing for a durable institution with the mission and resources to focus beyond the current news cycle or short-term politics of the moment. The IFI took on the far-sighted and critical task of investing in the creation of a civic foundation for peace, rather than being seduced and engulfed by the short-termism of crisis management.

By combining contributions from multiple donors, especially the US, the UK and others in the British Commonwealth, the IFI could reach a transformative and unprecedented \$1.5bn in direct funding, and \$2.4bn overall. This translated into \$44 per person per year (compared with around \$2 in Israel-Palestine). Funding more than 6,000 peacebuilding projects for a population at the time that was just over 1.5m, it transformed the civic landscape, and changed the political boundaries that politicians operated within, as well as the incentive structure they responded to. Before long, participation in these programmes became a right—and eventually a rite of passage—for young Catholics and Protestants, rather than a privilege enjoyed by a tiny minority.

Today, the reality in Northern Ireland is not perfect, but it is unrecognisable from the one that existed before the Good Friday Agreement. It is worth remembering that the Troubles saw 36,000 shootings, 16,000 bombings and 30,000 political prisoners, with almost 4,000 people losing their lives. In 1972 alone, there was a terrorist attack, on average, every 40 minutes. Two percent of the population was killed or maimed. If a similar conflict engulfed the whole of the UK, that would mean 100,000 casualties. In the US it would be 500,000. As flawed as Northern Ireland's peace remains today, it is still one of the most successful conflict-resolution projects in human history, with lessons that can and should be applied elsewhere, not least to Israel and Palestine.

THE URGENCY FOR ACTION

Looking at the reality between the River Jordan and the Mediterranean Sea in 2021, there are eerie parallels with Northern Ireland in the late 1980s. There have not been direct negotiations between the parties for years, violence and dehumanisation are spiking, and the political instability plaguing both Israeli and Palestinian polities—with deep divisions within each society, never mind the chasm that exists between them—making any talk of final status negotiations seem untethered from reality. Even using the word “peace” has become a signifier of naivete, with daily violence, dispossession and political dysfunction rendering it a more distant prospect than ever. In the short term, as many would have also concluded in Northern Ireland in the late 1980s, there is little hope on the horizon.

Yet the worst possible conclusion to draw from that analysis would be inaction. Beneath the surface, though periodically and increasingly breaking through, is a growing crisis among Israeli and Palestinian young people who have been cursed to inherit this legacy of repeated diplomatic failure. It is worthwhile remembering that both Israeli and (especially) Palestinian societies are far younger than Britain's. Every year, older Israelis and Palestinians—who remember better days, and are much more likely to support a two-state solution—exit each electorate, and are replaced by a younger cohort whose attitudes, conditioned by the grim era of the Second Intifada and its aftermath, often paint a frightening vision of the future, with conflict escalation far more likely than resolution.

The [youth statistics](#) are truly alarming: 73 percent of Palestinian youth supported the use of knives in confrontations with Israelis in 2015, and 70 percent of the same sample believe an intifada would achieve national rights more effectively than negotiations. Almost half of Jewish secondary school pupils say that Arab citizens of the state should not be allowed to [vote](#) or [sit](#) in the Knesset, and 84 percent of

18 to 24-year-old Israelis supported the actions of Elor Azaria, when he shot dead a wounded Palestinian attacker. Ninety percent of Palestinians and 79 percent of Israeli Jews think it [impossible to trust the other](#).

Elite-level diplomacy has very little chance of success in such a context, something it appears that the international community is belatedly beginning to internalise. Toward the end of his term, the then-US secretary of state John Kerry reflecting on his energetic, quixotic and ultimately unsuccessful attempt to revive a process that many warned was already dead or dying [remarked](#): “In the end, I believe the negotiations did not fail because the gaps were too wide, but because the level of trust was too low. Both sides were concerned that any concessions would not be reciprocated and would come at too great a political cost. And the deep public scepticism only made it more difficult for them to be able to take risks.” Former US ambassador and special envoy Martin Indyk [similarly concluded](#): “The difficulties we faced were far more because of the 20 years of distrust that built up than because of the core issues that divide the two sides.”

The Biden administration seems to have been learned this lesson “The only way to ensure Israel's future as a Jewish, democratic state and to give the Palestinians a state to which they are entitled is through the so-called two-state solution,” secretary of state Antony Blinken said during his confirmation hearing. He then added, however: “I think realistically it's hard to see near-term prospects for moving forward on that.”

Final status negotiations may be difficult now, but without a strategy to disrupt and reverse these youth attitudes, they will be all but impossible in the future. The diplomatic community saw a similar set of attitudes and misaligned variables in Northern Ireland in the late 1980s. Yet rather than reacting with despair or inaction, they chose to intervene at an unprecedented scale to utterly transform and rearrange those variables. The same is not only possible in Israel and Palestine but is now a moral and political imperative. Luckily, there are two variables in place that can allow such a strategy to succeed.

THE DISRUPTIVE PROMISE OF PEACEBUILDING

The first datapoint that should engender hope is the existence of a cohort of civic peacebuilders, many among them members of the Alliance for Middle East Peace (ALLMEP), who stand diametrically opposed to the despair, hatred and violence that has engulfed so many of their counterparts. They are fragile, chronically underfunded and often the victims of attacks from extremist actors and politicians. But they are also dedicated, highly innovative and deeply networked with one another. They represent the embryo of an Arab/Jewish and Israeli/Palestinian partnership that is not only viable, but can and must be scaled exponentially as a prerequisite of any real strategy to achieve a genuine peace in the region. Perhaps most importantly: they are very effective. Study after study demonstrates that the programmes – which range across a wide variety of fields, including tech, the environment, health and young people – of these peacebuilding organisations reliably disrupt and reverse the same attitudes which make diplomacy so unlikely to succeed right now. They reverse fear and dehumanisation, create ideas and institutions that can break the political deadlock, and produce citizens who place resolution of the conflict at the top of their political agenda, and as a core part of their very identities.

Programme participants leave these initiatives with far higher trust and willingness to work with “the other side”. Take, for instance, the Parents Circle, a group of bereaved Israelis and Palestinians who channel the power and moral force of their grief toward conflict resolution. Eighty percent of the Israeli and Palestinian youth who participated in their “History Through the Human Eye” dialogue project were more willing to work for peace, 71 percent reported more trust and empathy for the “other”, and 77 percent had a greater belief that reconciliation is possible.

Another of ALLMEP's members, the Near East Foundation has worked with 3,400 Palestinian and Israeli olive producers since 2013, facilitating the export of 4,500 tonnes of olive oil from the West Bank to Israel and producing \$25m in income for Palestinian farmers. In addition to the vital economic support it provided, 90 percent of participants [reported](#) increased trust in “the other” and 77 percent indicated their intention to continue cross-border cooperation after the project's conclusion, without the need for continued oversight or encouragement.

Typically, these new beliefs are remarkably long-lasting, persisting for years after participation has ended. In a study commissioned by the US international development agency, USAID, the Notre Dame Initiative for Global Development found that three to five years after engagement, participants in a variety of different programmes, including both those mentioned above:

- Had continued positive feelings about the “other”;
- Felt that this was a unique opportunity to know the “other”;
- Stayed connected with one another;
- Had an increased belief that peace is possible; and
- Held a changed perception of the other thanks to the programmes' activities.

Many participants, moreover, translate their new, positive attitudes into active, long-term work for peace. For instance, a remarkable 17.5 percent of alumni from Seeds of Peace's first decade of operations went on to careers in the peacebuilding field. Indeed, many of the most steadfast, consistent voices for peace among Israeli and Palestinian politicians are alumni or lay leaders of people-to-people programmes, including Israeli Knesset member Ayman Odeh, former-MK Stav Shaffir, and the late Dr Saeb Erekat.

What is interesting is that each of the cases above— from bereaved family groups, to agricultural cooperatives, and cross-community youth programmes—have remarkably similar counterparts in Northern Ireland, each of whom received IFI funding and played important roles in civic peacebuilding in the 1990s. The key difference is scale.

In the Israeli-Palestinian context, we know that such peacebuilding projects transform the course of an individual's life: but we have never provided anywhere near enough funding or political support to allow them to transform whole communities, or critical masses of Israeli and Palestinian society. Why not? With a recent and not so recent past littered with ineffective investments and interventions, policymakers are now finally beginning to understand the unparalleled return on investment that these programmes can provide, and the essential, foundational role that they play in any workable strategy to end this conflict.

A HISTORIC BREAKTHROUGH: THE NITA M. LOWEY MIDDLE EAST PARTNERSHIP FOR PEACE ACT

The second connected variable that should give cause for hope is the emergence of a new policy tool that is predicated on the transformative power of these programmes, finally funding them at a level commensurate with their importance and centrality to a realistic theory of change for the region. The [2020 Nita M. Lowey Middle East Partnership for Peace Act \(MEPPA\)](#) is a \$250m bipartisan law enacted by the US Congress in December 2020. Inspired by the IFI and pioneered by ALLMEP as part of the project to create an International Fund for Israeli-Palestinian Peace, MEPPA aims to provide unprecedented levels of resources that will create an environment conducive to peacemaking. It specifically directs funding for the kinds of projects described above, namely:

- “projects to help build the foundation for peaceful co-existence between Israelis and Palestinians and for a sustainable two-state solution,”
- “shared community building, peaceful co-existence, dialogue, and reconciliation between Arab and Jewish citizens of Israel,” and
- “investments in, and support to, entities that carry out projects that contribute to the development of the Palestinian private sector economy in the West Bank and Gaza,” with a particular priority on “projects that increase economic cooperation between Israelis and Palestinians”.

The legislation enjoys not only the support of some of the most senior foreign policy voices in Congress, but also an unprecedented coalition of US advocacy organisations that ALLMEP has helped to shape, many of whom seldomly champion the same piece of legislation. From AIPAC to J Street, the American Jewish Committee to the New Israel Fund, and Churches for Middle East Peace to Israel Policy Forum: this project has allowed a broad network of groups who often disagree on much to come together in recognition of the urgent need to avert the growing crisis among young Israelis and Palestinians, by instead scaling up the work of the region’s peacebuilders.

Perhaps most critically, the legislation allows for international partnership and multilateral cooperation, with seats on an advisory board available to US allies. This opens up the potential for the pooling of not just resources, but also legitimacy, expertise and personnel. Moreover, further expansion of this project opens the door to it becoming a truly international fund, with the US contribution via MEPPA ensuring that it is at a scale that matches the depth of the problem it seeks to address. Just as the IFI brought together Commonwealth nations and the United States as core funders, allowing greater trust to be engendered among nationalists and unionists, so too can an International Fund for Israeli-Palestinian Peace pool contributions from the US, UK, Europe and now—following the Abraham Accords—wealthy Arab states. Each can bring resources, insights, relationships and legitimacy that not only increases the budget and ambition of the projects, but the impact and reach within both Israeli and Palestinian society.

A CRITICAL ROLE FOR THE UK

Thanks in large part to the partnership of Labour Friends of Israel, which was the first UK organisation to champion the International Fund project, there is now real momentum for British leadership within this new project. The UK became the first government in the world to endorse the International Fund concept in 2018, before legislation had even been enacted in the US. In a 90-minute Westminster Hall debate on the topic last November, there was clear cross-party consensus on the need for UK leadership in this project, with every MP who spoke endorsing the idea. That debate was led by Labour’s Catherine McKinnell, a vice-chair of Labour Friends of Israel and a member of Labour Friends of Palestine and the Middle East. “An International Fund for Israeli-Palestinian Peace would provide that much-needed focus and investment to enable co-existence projects to operate at scale and to amplify their impact,” she argued. McKinnell’s intervention led to Foreign Office minister James Duddridge pledging to “look specifically at whether we should take one of those seats and at the timing of commitments. There is no point deciding late in the day that we do want to commit and that we would have liked a seat.”

Earlier this year, Labour Friends of Israel chair Steve McCabe joined his Conservative Friends of Israel counterpart Stephen Crabb in penning a joint piece in *The Times*, calling on the UK to join the Fund’s board and launch a truly joint US-UK effort, writing: “an international fund for Israel-Palestinian peace could not come at a better time. Britain should seize this moment to be part of it.” Soon after the piece in *The Times*, Middle East Minister James Cleverly—responding to questions coming from both the Conservative and Labour benches—told the House of Commons that the government “support[s] the objectives of the International Fund for Israeli-Palestinian Peace, and we will continue to engage with the

Alliance for Middle East Peace and President Biden's Administration to identify further opportunities for collaboration”.

In the early months of President Biden's administration, interest in participating in this project is now growing across Europe and among US allies around the world. In March, the UN's special coordinator Tor Wennesland, speaking at the Security Council, welcomed MEPPAs' passage as a “crucial vote of confidence at a challenging moment”, and encouraged other UN member states to “increase their assistance for these activities”. The appointment of [Ambassador Samantha Power](#) – a committed multilateralist and expert in conflict resolution – to lead USAID, should also encourage US partners to see the multilateral scope within this project, which can and should have the UK in a leading role.

The British government now has a historic opportunity to help launch an ambitious ready-to-go initiative that it was itself the earliest advocate for, and that can bind the US and the UK together in a brand new, post-Brexit institution that they jointly shape, drawing from their experience in Northern Ireland. More than that, the UK can provide unique insight and expertise in both conflict resolution and economic development, aiding the evolution of a brand-new institution that can have transatlantic cooperation at its core, and conflict resolution as its mission. The Quartet, the EU, and the UN can all have a role to play too, as—for the first time—can Gulf states like the UAE and Bahrain, allowing a multi-track and inclusive approach on a scale that has not been tried since the Madrid conference in 1991. For those sceptical of the Abraham Accords' import as tools that can be leveraged toward meaningful progress toward Israeli-Palestinian peace, the participation of these actors in such a project could, to paraphrase ~~David Makovsky~~ of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, ensure that they work as a “bridge rather than a bypass road”, and introduce a new regional dynamic into people-to-people programmes.

Working independently, the UK and other similarly sized actors can, of course, make a difference. But the real utility of working via a focused multilateral entity such as the International Fund is the unprecedented scale that it can unleash. Instead of projects that engage dozens or hundreds of stakeholders, we could instead have an impact upon hundreds of thousands, and even millions, of people. That same leap in scale can also unlock innovative approaches to health, the environment, agriculture and education. EcoPeace's Desalination/Solar Nexus project, for example, promises to link Israel, Palestine and Jordan in a cooperative and interdependent structure that can allow clean water and cheap energy for all. Yet there exists no entity capable of funding the \$5m feasibility study. In the field of health, Project Rozana's work to provide ventilators, vaccines and hospital equipment to clinicians in the West Bank and Gaza— all rooted in Israeli-Palestinian partnership—has been saving lives since the onset of the pandemic, but cannot secure enough funds to meet the current need. MEET's tech and innovation programme for Israeli and Palestinian secondary school pupils has a base of 90 Hebrew- and Arabic-speaking schools. But imagine for a moment if it encompassed thousands of secondary schools, allowing cross-border youth partnership to become a universal milestone in the adolescence of every Israeli and Palestinian young person. In each instance, smart and scalable plans are in place, but, until now, there has been no funding source equal to the challenge.

In recent weeks, we have caught a glimpse of one possible future for the region. The horrific cycle of rocket attacks and airstrikes – and the weeks of escalating racism, injustice, and violence that preceded them – were shaming us all for the reality we have allowed to emerge in recent decades. And they were warning us of what is to come, absent intervention. Yet, the situation has reaffirmed our view that there can be no peace without Arab-Jewish and Israeli-Palestinian partnership. These values may have been sorely tested. However, they remain the only path out of this tragedy and must form the bedrock of any real strategy for a more just and equitable future. If previous generations of leaders had adopted the same strategy in Israel and Palestine as they had in Northern Ireland, not only would such scenes be far less likely, but there would also be a huge, cross-border coalition of institutions and citizens standing in opposition. There would be political leaders—many of them alumni of these programmes—urging

restraint and decency, and vibrant parallel political constituencies empowering them to do so. Perhaps, there would even be peace.

It is high time that we learn the lesson of the most successful conflict resolution project that the US and the UK ever jointly embarked upon, and invest at scale to create the sort of future Israelis and Palestinians each deserve, but that the international community have invested relatively little in actually shaping. Establishing an International Fund for Israeli-Palestinian Peace can be the first step on a path to a very different future. One with Israeli-Palestinian partnership as its organising principle, and with US and UK leadership as its catalyst.

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THE MIDDLE EAST 'YOUTH-QUAKE'

EMMAN EL-BADAWY

The Middle East is a youthful region, and the role of the young will be essential to future progress.

Since the second half of the 20th century, the youth of the Middle East has become numerically dominant. As many as two-thirds of the region's population is [now aged 35 or younger](#). As young people have become more demographically significant, they have also become a beacon of hope for change. In 2019, for example, [UNICEF predicted](#) that the most promising period for the Middle East and North Africa will be between now and 2040, when the “dependency ratio” of the populations in the region – that is the proportion of those typically in the labour force as against those who are not – will reach its lowest in living memory, and as the youngest transition into their most “productive” years. This “demographic dividend” is often seen as a basis for genuine reform in a region that faces a decisive crossroads and where urgent investment is needed to create opportunities for today's millennial and “Z” generations (those born after 1981 and 1997 respectively). It is the youngest in the region who, it is now hoped, can be “agents of change”, ushering in a more stable and prosperous Middle East.

It is naturally tempting to view younger generations in the Middle East as a pivotal force for shaping a progressive approach to the region; one that is centred on economic prosperity, social modernisation and technological innovation. However, if policymakers are to harness the genuine opportunities these demographic changes present, it is also vital not to ignore the past. Young Arab adults today remain products of the region's long, complex and contested history, and their chances of breaking down taboos, and realising their full potential, depend upon significant economic and social reform. They can, and should, be at the forefront of progressive thinking about priorities and a sustainable Middle East strategy. But they are not an easy answer or a chance for a simple “system reboot” in a region of competing interests and ideologies. A programme of regular analysis – one informed by active dialogue with young adults in the region – is needed to determine whether new generations hold fundamentally different outlooks from their predecessors, and if so, how this should change UK foreign policy.

TURNING POINTS

There have been many periods in the Middle East's eventful history where it is possible to discern the decisive role new political generations have played. The story of the transition from the Ottoman conception of the Islamic lands before the first world war to the development of the idea of a secular and socialist “Arab world”, for instance, demonstrates the importance youth movements, students and thinkers played in the process of change. Similarly, we could trace the journey from pan-Arabism to the revival of political Islam and see how young adults mobilised and formed the backbone of social movements either to resist or promote this critical shift. “Al-Shabab” (youngsters) or “al-futuwwa” (youth) – words that in Arabic convey vitality, forthrightness and hope – have shaped the socio-political dynamics of the region through every period of change.

Recent events are no different. A decade later, the “Arab Spring” is still remembered as a predominantly youthful uprising and it has proved to be an important turning point, despite failing to bring about lasting democratic change in the region. Before 2011, there had been little study of the millennial generation that instigated and sustained the protests. The future of the Middle East, most experts previously argued, was shaped and formed by the convergent interests of authoritarian and dictatorial figures, the military, the religious establishment and the international community. These well-established centres of power in

the Middle East absorbed most scholarly attention, while only rarely did young people receive much consideration or reflection.

When they were discussed, young people were seen simply in terms of education and labour market reform and referred to as “human capital”, or they were viewed as security risks and potential recruits to terrorist organisations or Islamist movements. Indeed, there were few notable studies and little commentary on intergenerational shifts in the Middle East. Not enough was therefore known or understood about the millennials whose formative, childhood and adolescent years took place against the backdrop of the first Gulf war, the First Intifada, and the Oslo peace process, 9/11 and the Iraq war. Their parents were of the generations who lived through the transition to independence from foreign rule, Baathism and Nasserism, the Suez Crisis, the 1967 war, the collapse of pan-Arabism, the Yom Kippur war and the Lebanese civil war. Their children – [known popularly now as “Gen Z”](#) – entered adolescence following the Arab Spring, the Syrian civil war, and the resurgence of al-Qaeda and Islamic State. They are also the first generation to come of age witnessing the emergence of a warm peace between Israel and the Arab nations of the UAE and Bahrain.

But if today’s young adults are to shape a “new Middle East”, what do we know about them?

A PICTURE IS FORMING

Today, the landscape for regionwide surveys is competitive and rich with data, and most remain independently funded despite the clear value governments – still keen, after the “Arab Spring”, to closely monitor the views of young Arab adults to prevent future popular uprisings – stand to gain in the analysis they can provide. Thus evidence beyond the mere anecdotal is building that can help to judge the extent to which younger generations differ from their parents and grandparents on fundamental issues.

Year on year, these regionwide surveys have built an evolving picture of today’s Arab youth: [religious but less tolerant of the politicisation of religion than older generations](#); [more likely to want to emigrate](#); tired of pervasive corruption in their societies; [united in their support of region-wide anti-government protests and hopeful about the possibility of positive change resulting from them](#); critical of poor governance, rising prices and the lack of jobs, while maintaining [high expectations for education and employment as they search beyond traditional jobs](#); disinterested in elections and political process and [more likely to see them as rigged or unfair compared to older generations](#); embracing the digital and [technological revolution](#); and increasingly interested in social enterprise, volunteering work and tech-based solutions.

SIGNS OF CHANGE

But, as the broad picture of today’s Arab youth develops, questions about whether their attitudes represent a genuine shift from those of previous generations remain unanswered. While data and insights are plentiful today compared to previously, the results do not yet indicate a decisive shift. Given the relatively short period of time being examined, and the absence of historic datasets concerning previous generations, detecting intergenerational change is a highly complex challenge.

Nonetheless, the surveys do help to indicate where there could be reason for optimism for the future, with new data challenging long-outdated stereotypes of the Arab populace.

ON POLITICAL REFORM

The first and most outdated stereotype to challenge with respect to the Arab Middle East has been the notion that democracy is somehow incompatible and/or undesirable in the region. Over the course of several decades, the World Values Survey has seen a [closing of the gap in attitudes towards democracy](#)

between western European societies and Muslim Arab societies. For the last two published waves (wave five for 2005-2009 and six for 2010-2014) since 2005, the survey has found that, when asked about the virtues of different models for governing a country, democracy had an overwhelmingly positive image across the world. Support for democracy as a political system was as high among Arab and Islamic populations as it was among western secular societies and significantly higher than among populations of post-Communist countries. This enduring support for democracy has been shown across Middle East surveys. For example, the Arab Barometer in 2019 published data that showed Tunisians (78 percent), Libyans (74 percent), Egyptians (70 percent) and Yemenis (51 percent) firmly believe that, despite the crises following the Arab uprisings and their imperfections, and democratic systems remain the best option.

While holding favourable attitudes towards democracy, the key priority for Arab youth with regard to political reform in recent years has been focused on tackling corruption and poor or weak governance. In 2012, the year following the youth-led protests, ASDA'A BCW Arab Youth Survey – the region's only annual survey dedicated to those under 24 years olds – found that the salience of the issues of fair pay and home ownership had overtaken democracy as priorities. Support for political reform has remained significant amongst Arab youth in the annual surveys before and since 2011, the issues impacting young people and their priorities have moved on. In the [latest Arab Youth Survey](#), published in 2020, 77 percent of youth complained of corruption in society and identified it as the top priority to tackle if the region is to see genuine progress over the next decade. In other polls, concern about corruption is even higher and such concerns represent a clear consensus across the region. Despite this, both the Arab Barometer and the Arab Opinion Index have repeatedly shown high levels of trust in the military, even where discontent surrounding corruption has been highest. Most Arabs when asked have also consistently identified [politicians as the main source of widespread corruption](#). Needless to say, amidst the unfolding pandemic, the [top issue for young Arabs in 2020](#), was corruption.

While the Arab Youth Survey continues to indicate that Arab young people view protest as a viable means for political change, many (42 percent in 2020) are now considering emigrating due to pervasive corruption and rising unemployment. This desire to escape is most prevalent in the Levantine countries of the region with 66 percent of young people in Lebanon, Iraq, Jordan, Syria, the Palestinian territories and Yemen saying they wish to emigrate. The desire to emigrate correlates closely with negative attitudes towards the performance of government and low approval ratings scored by education systems. Young Arabs, according to surveys, appear to see the value of political reform for achieving their individual aspirations.

ON SOCIAL REFORM

Though the last decade has exploded the myth that Arab youth are apathetic about politics, much is unknown or ambiguous with regards to their attitudes towards social issues. Survey data has reported conflicting attitudes among younger Arabs towards gender equality and sexual liberties. Overall, while elements of civil society in the Middle East are increasingly organising around and raising these issues, a broader and significant shift towards liberalism does not appear to have occurred.

Indeed, in terms of attitudes towards gender equality and sexual identity and liberalisation, [the culture gap between the Middle East and the west has widened](#). As younger generations in the west have gradually become more liberal on these issues, Arab and Muslim-majority societies, according to the World Values Survey, have remained the most traditional in the world. Thus when asked about equal rights and opportunities for women – tested via agreement with statements such as “men make better political leaders than women” and “university education is more important for boys than for girls” – western and Muslim-majority Arab countries scored 82 percent and 55 percent respectively. On issues of homosexuality, divorce and abortion, tolerance was lowest among Arab and Muslim-majority societies in

2014. Similarly, premarital sex was considered more immoral than violence against others or criminality and theft.

It is possible to politically reform a country before a change in social attitudes takes place (many countries in the Middle East with electoral politics proves this). However, the link between liberal democracy and liberal social values has proved significant. The World Values Surveys in the last four decades have shown that, for example, [gender equality is both a key indicator of social tolerance](#) and closely linked to the effective functioning of democracy. Although the world has shown a clear intergenerational shift toward growing support for gender equality, the trend has been uneven and mixed in the Middle East. Younger generations in Lebanon, Morocco, Tunisia, Iran, Turkey, Palestine, Jordan, Egypt and Iraq show statistically significant tendencies to be more in favour of gender equality than their older compatriots. But that trend isn't evident in Libya, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Qatar and Bahrain where there is little or no evidence of intergenerational shifts toward growing support for gender equality. Further analysis is needed to explain this apparent difference but what is clear is that the wealth or stability of a country alone is not sufficient to help determine advancement in attitudes among younger generations towards fundamental social issues. The overall trend though is one to watch and could be indirectly connected to emerging trends on attitudes towards religion in the region.

ON RELIGION

For decades, the Middle East has been characterised by persistent religious conflict and extremism, yet survey data is revealing a trend towards more open-minded and tolerant expressions of religious identity. During the past five to 10 years, regionwide surveys have revealed a steady pattern that suggests Arab youth are less religious than older generations, with an increasing desire to separate religion from public life. According to the [Arab Barometer in 2019](#), less than 50 percent of those under 34 years old in Arab countries overall considered themselves to be “religious”, with the highest rates of religiosity in Iraq (42 percent), Egypt (36 percent), Yemen (33 percent) and Palestine (28 percent). Perhaps more significant is that the share of young Arabs describing themselves as “not religious” has risen in the last seven years. By 2019, nearly half of Tunisian young people described themselves in these terms, as did one-third of young Libyans. Likewise, the [Arab Opinion Index](#) has shown attitudes are becoming more relaxed when people are asked what they understand to be a religious way of life, with a majority of Arab populations stressing the importance of morality and values over organised religious practices and rituals. A majority (65 percent) of Arabs surveyed for the study in 2020 rejected the practice of declaring followers of other religions as infidels, and most (62 percent) showed no preference when it comes to interacting with religious or non-religious groups when going about their day-to-day lives.

For young Arabs polled in the [Arab Youth Survey](#) religion has remained one of the most important components of personal identity; ahead of tribe, family or nation. But despite its importance in young Arabs' personal lives, religion is considered by the vast majority (67 percent) to be too influential in the region and in public life. In 2019, the survey [revealed](#) that 79 percent of Arab youth believed religious institutions needed reforming, and this number has remained a majority for the last three years, despite falling to 66 percent 2020. When asked in the 2020 Arab Opinion Index to explain the rise of the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq, as many as 42 percent of respondents pointed to extremism inherent in Middle East societies. And in the 2015, 2016 and 2017 Arab Youth Surveys, extremism, the rise of IS and the ongoing threat of terrorism were identified as respondents' most pressing concerns. It is therefore unsurprising that regionwide surveys have indicated that, over the past five to 10 years, many Arab young people are rethinking the role of religion in everyday life.

Trust in political parties, though low overall, is lowest and declining for those with a religious or Islamist affiliation [according the data since 2013](#). Trust towards religious leaders and support for them having a

say in government has also been steadily declining since 2013 when the questions were first asked. Faith, though still important, is thus increasingly becoming a personal matter.

Time will tell how the trends on religion develop further, but public unrest driven by young people in the region in the past decade – notably between 2011-12 and in 2019 – correlate with survey findings to date. The slogan “In the name of religion, the thieves robbed us”, chanted by Iraqi Shia youth in the 2019 demonstrations, are further evidence that an active cohort of Arab youth are ready to reject decades of sectarianism and the politicisation of religion. How much a shift in attitudes towards religion and its place in society could influence shifts on other cultural, social and political issues in the region is hard to determine. However, given how central a role religion has played in both the region’s social and political makeup, it is a potentially transformative shift, and a trend to watch.

ON ASPIRATIONS AND EDUCATION

In other areas, too, young adults in the region are challenging traditional attitudes, most notably in their approach and aspirations in the world of work. While the vast majority are concerned about unemployment in their country and are looking to emigrate for opportunities abroad, [more and more Arab youth are turning to the private sector and not-for-profits for employment](#). A growing number aspire to be entrepreneurs despite mounting economic uncertainty, with this trend most prominent in the Gulf countries and North Africa.

As digital natives, young adults in today’s Middle East are well placed to maximise the opportunities of the fourth industrial revolution that will demand technologically advanced thinking and innovation. However, across the region, young people are [less and less satisfied with their countries’ education systems](#) compared to older generations, and [express concerns that their education](#) is not preparing them for the future of work. According to the latest Arab Barometer, the intergenerational difference is most pronounced in Egypt and Morocco, with 22 percentage point gap between older and younger Moroccans and 10 percentage points between younger Egyptians and their older counterparts. The exception to this trend is in Tunisia and Jordan, where young people in each express greater satisfaction compared with older generations.

Across the region, attitudes among young adults towards employment in the public sector are poor, with approval ratings ranging from as low as five percent in Lebanon to no higher than 32 percent in Yemen. This correlates with the rise in interest in private sector jobs, despite the relative shortage of such opportunities given the demand. The [vast majority of young Arab citizens](#) also believe that obtaining employment requires having strong connections, or *wasta*. Around nine in 10 young people in Iraq (95 percent), Lebanon (94 percent), Jordan (94 percent), Tunisia (94 percent), Libya (91 percent), Algeria (91 percent), Sudan (90 percent), Palestine (90 percent), Egypt (90 percent) and Morocco (88 percent) say that, based on their recent experiences, obtaining employment through personal connections happens often or sometimes. These figures directly correlate with regionwide perceptions of corruption in Middle East societies. Young people are thus acutely aware that the political and social environment will have a profound effect on their individual and collective opportunities in the region.

The four broad areas examined – political reform, social reform, religion and aspiration and education – are by no means exhaustive in terms of the insights that can be gleaned from delving into the regionwide surveys, but they each either challenge outdated stereotypes about attitudes within the region or represent emerging and important points of departure from its past. While complex, the attitudes of the overwhelmingly young population in the region are showing signs of change; challenging once popular beliefs about the region’s exceptionalism, the role of religion, the importance of the public sector in everyday life, and the prospects for political reform. These signs provide reasons for optimism: together,

these shifts in attitudes have the power to be transformative for the region and prepare it to be an active player, and constructive partner, for future UK policy.

PEACE WITH ISRAEL

In many ways, the Abraham Accords are one of the most momentous and uplifting events of the 21st century. It proved that even the most intractable problems and taboo subjects can be addressed and overcome with the right vision and shared interests in today's Middle East. At a minimum, the peace agreements represent a major official shift in attitudes among the political elite in the Gulf. They signal a willingness among the region's political leadership to set the tone for future and open cooperation and partnership with Israel. None of the signatories to the agreements would have expected universal acceptance of the treaties among their people. Polling on Israel-Arab relations has shown a deep entrenchment of anti-Israel sentiment over the years. In 2011, for instance, [a Brookings poll showed](#) a majority of Arabs remained unsupportive of Arab-Israeli peace unless an agreement was reached for a two-state solution, and most were sceptical this could happen. A look to the [Arab Barometer polling since 2006](#) reveals that support for the recognition of Israel had in fact declined over the last decade.

After the signing of the 2020 peace deals, the pollsters turned to the region for reactions with mixed and contradictory findings. In November 2020, the Arab Barometer questioned people in Algeria, Jordan, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco and Tunisia about their attitudes towards the normalisation deals with Israel. The results found that less than 10 percent were in favour of the Abraham Accords. The notable exception within the six-country survey was Lebanon, with 20 percent overall in favour of the deals, and the Christian and Druze communities dominating the most positive responses. However, [Zogby Research Services surveyed](#) adults in 10 Middle East countries and found that a majority of those surveyed in the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Jordan described normalisation as “desirable”.

Recent polls have shown a variation in attitudes dependent on age. A poll by the Washington Institute showed [modest improvements in attitudes](#) marked by more promising results among the youngest cohorts. Between June and November 2020, the poll of Emiratis found that backing for economic ties between Israel and the UAE had risen from 14 percent to 39 percent with those under the age of 30 most supportive of such relations. Likewise, the Arab Barometer's November 2020 survey results noted that younger Algerians were more likely to favour the peace deals than older cohorts, but the reverse was true in Lebanon with only seven percent of 18-29 year-olds in favour compared to 26 percent among those aged over 30.

It will take years to truly begin to see any positive shift in attitudes towards Israel among the Arab populations. Values and attitudes take time – and often generations – to formally shift. It is, though, important to remember that, for Middle East leaders, the cost of misjudging what is tolerable to their people can be a matter of life or death. The Camp David Accords – a colder peace between Israel and Egypt – were signed by Egyptian President Anwar al-Sadat in 1978 and it cost him his life in 1981. His assassin, Khaled al-Islambouli, was 27 years-old and many of his accomplices were even younger. Thus the most violent resistance to Sadat's bravery came not from the generation that had fought a series of wars with Israel, but instead from the younger generation which the late president had hoped would help him forge a more open, stable and prosperous Egypt.

Progressives, therefore, can be sure that no political leader in the region today can afford to make uncalculated and uninformed choices when it comes to momentous decisions like the one to embark on a warm, open peace with Israel. Research proves that the injustices faced by the Palestinian people will continue to be of major concern to Arab populations. But the hope is that a new generation may come to recognise the costs of protracted wars among neighbours and choose instead to embrace a new path

built on shared interests, cooperation and mutual respect. That includes reviving the Israeli-Palestinian peace process.

CONCLUSION

A progressive approach that hopes to secure a new stable and prosperous Middle East would do well to ensure it encourages and supports younger generations to think in new and innovate ways. This should be done as part of a broader and coherent regional strategy for the UK in the Middle East. The Middle East has seen a rapid series of events over the past two decades, and significant and dramatic changes that have historically brought forward new political generations in the past. It is still too early to determine whether the post-Arab Spring generation can take the lessons of the uprisings and together build a coherent vision for change. But what is already clear is that a focus on specific priorities is emerging and these appear to be driven by a growing pragmatism and maturity. Anecdotally, those intimately familiar with the region see the signs that those under 30 years-olds are vastly different to their parents and grandparents in their life choices, interests and skills. Of course, how deep that change goes, and whether the conditions are present to enable reform to take place, remains a fundamental question that should be repeatedly asked in the development of a progressive Middle East policy.

Despite the Middle East's volatile economic, political and security situation, most young adults are, [research indicates](#), optimistic overall about the future, but it is [uneven](#). While the regionwide surveys help to showcase consensus across borders, they can hide important divides. Thus young people in the wealthier Gulf countries are significantly more optimistic than those in the Levant or North Africa. The region shares a common language, culture, and, increasingly, a hope for the future. But there is a wide variability between the haves and have nots. The lessons of the last 10 years have shown that there is a strong feeling of solidarity that transcends national borders in the Arab world, intensified by the advent of the internet and use of social media. Policymakers – whether they are in London, Cairo, Riyadh, Dubai, or Baghdad – should work to even this out and ensure a degree of prosperity and investment reaches all countries of the Middle East.

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PROGRESSIVE MIDDLE EAST POLICY IN THE AGE OF BIDEN

BARONESS META RAMSAY

Labour can learn from Joe Biden's balanced and constructive approach to the Middle East.

Joe Biden's campaign for the presidency and his approach since taking office demonstrate a progressive, pro-Israel agenda which Labour should study carefully as it seeks to craft its own policies towards the Middle East.

In recent weeks, the president has worked to bring the terrible violence which broke out in Israel and Gaza to a swift close, and we have seen the virtues of this approach. In place of rhetorical grandstanding, the president used his credibility with the Israeli government to engage in quiet diplomacy thus helping to broker a ceasefire. His rejection of megaphone diplomacy may not bring the acclaim of social media, but it delivers results. And, in his [limited public comments](#), Biden also delivered some truths about the violence that are too often forgotten: that it is possible to both believe that a nation under terrorist rocket attack has the right to defend itself and that the only long-term answer to the conflict is a two-state solution. Moreover, he also recognised that, throughout the last seven decades, there has been one unchanging and inescapable fundamental reality: "Until the region says, unequivocally, they acknowledge the right of Israel to exist as an independent Jewish state, there will be no peace."

Biden's credibility with, and influence in, Israel – the two features are intimately linked – rests upon decades of staunch support for the Jewish state. The president's Zionism – he is one of the few non-Jewish politicians in the US to describe himself as such – is both principled and deep-rooted. "Biden would often tell me how his support for Israel was formed," the former Democrat congressman Steve Israel [wrote](#) shortly before the election. "He was a young kid sitting at the dinner table. It was around the time of the debate on the establishment of the modern state of Israel," Israel suggested. "His father was unable to comprehend how anyone could oppose this historic step. To this Irish American Catholic salesman, it was obvious why Israel had to exist. The establishment of a state for the Jewish people was the only way to fulfil the promise of 'never again' after the tragedy of the Holocaust. It was the first time Biden ever heard that phrase, and he never forgot the lesson."

Biden's understanding of the link between antisemitism and anti-Zionism and his recognition that Israel stands as the ultimate safeguard against a repeat of the horrors of the Shoah was apparent decades later in his final address to AIPAC as vice-president. "When swastikas are painted on synagogues, when Jewish people are targeted in terrorist attacks, when thousands of European Jews immigrate to Israel out of fear when a seemingly organised effort to discredit, delegitimise and isolate Israel persists on the international stage, it's dangerous, it's wrong and every time we encounter it, we have an obligation to speak out against it," [he argued](#).

ISRAEL IN THE BIDEN ERA

After his election to the Senate in 1972, Biden chose Israel as one of his first overseas trips and [later described](#) a meeting with Golda Meir as "one of the most consequential meetings I've ever had in my life". Of course, much of Biden's time in the Senate – including that when he was a leading player on the

Senate Foreign Relations Committee – was spent during a period when support for Israel stretched across party lines and both parties recognised the need to avoid turning the issue into a political football. So obviously disregarded by his predecessor, this sense that Israel should be above partisan squabbling is something that the president is rightly committed to restoring.

What is perhaps most impressive about Biden's commitment to Israel is that – even as his campaign appeared to founder during the primary season – he refused to pander to left-wing activists who wanted the Democrats to weaken or abandon their party's historic backing for the Jewish state.

He opposed, for instance, calls to withhold or condition security assistance to Israel, [firmly stating](#): “I strongly oppose Israel's settlement policy on the West Bank ... But the idea that we would cut off military aid to an ally, our only true, true ally in the entire region, is absolutely preposterous. It's just beyond my comprehension anyone would do that.” He later [repeated and toughened](#) that opposition by making clear: “I'm not going to place conditions for the security assistance given the serious threats that Israel is facing.” Underlining his “unbreakable commitment to Israel's security”, Biden instead trumpeted his role in helping to secure the Obama administration's \$38bn 10-year military aid package to Israel – the largest in US history – which was signed between the two countries in 2016.

Nor did Biden hedge or caveat his unequivocal opposition to BDS, [arguing that](#) it “too often veers into antisemitism” and pledging to oppose other “efforts to delegitimise Israel on the global stage”. This willingness to clearly call out the prejudices which underpin the boycott movement – why else does it alone target the world's sole Jewish state? – is most welcome.

Thus, by the time of Biden's nomination as his party's presidential candidate, [argued Peter Mulrean](#), who served for three decades in the State Department, the section on Israel and Palestine in the Democrats' platform represented “a clear victory for those supporting a return to mainstream Democratic policies of the past and a loss for the progressives seeking more restrictive or conditional support for Israel”.

Biden has long understood, moreover, that a two-state solution is key to Israel's safety and maintaining the most precious elements of its character, [calling it in 2019](#) “the only way to ensure Israel's long-term security while sustaining its Jewish and democratic identity”. “It is also the only way to ensure Palestinian dignity and their legitimate interest in national self-determination,” Biden added. “And it is a necessary condition to take full advantage of the opening that exists for greater cooperation between Israel and its Arab neighbours. For all these reasons, encouraging a two-state solution remains in the critical interest of the US.”

A TWO-STATE SOLUTION

The president recognises that those who are genuinely committed to a two-state solution must adopt a policy of even-handedness grounded in an understanding of the complexities of this tragic conflict. While Donald Trump famously promised to conclude the “deal of the century” – treating a conflict which involves huge pain and sensitivity on the part of Israelis and Palestinians alike as if it were a piece of Manhattan real estate – Biden has a more realistic goal. Knowing that the two sides aren't yet willing to sit down and make the difficult concessions and compromises meaningful direct negotiations require, the president, former US ambassador to Israel Dan Shapiro has argued, is attempting to “ensure that all parties will do everything possible to sustain the viability of the two-state solution and avoid doing anything that makes it harder”. Biden, [he also noted](#), believes that the best way to pursue two states is “not through threats and ultimatums but through vigorous diplomacy”.

That goal was apparent in Biden's steadfast opposition to Israel seizing the opportunity presented to it by the Trump “peace plan” to annex parts of the West Bank. “I've spent a lifetime working to advance

the security [and] survival of a Jewish and democratic Israel. This is not the way,” [he suggested](#). “Israel needs to stop the threats of annexation and stop settlement activity because it will choke off any hope of peace.” And Biden – who had previously [urged Arab states](#) to “move beyond quiet talks and take bolder steps towards normalisation with Israel” – has supported the Abraham Accords which took the issue of annexation off the table and opened up previously unimaginable opportunities for cooperation between Israel and a number of Arab states.

Moreover, unlike Trump, Biden and his secretary of state, Anthony Blinken, have correctly recognised that normalisation could play an important role in creating conditions more conducive to tackling the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians. “The more countries normalise their relationship with Israel, the greater I think Israel’s confidence is in being able to make peace across the board ... and also hopefully to resolve the Palestinian issue to the extent that it makes Israelis feel generally more secure,” [Blinken suggested](#) shortly before the election. “That may be helpful in creating greater confidence to move forward with the Palestinians, and it may also be that it does send a message to the Palestinians that they have to actually engage, negotiate in a meaningful way.”

THE PALESTINIANS IN THE BIDEN ERA

But Biden knows too that this requires a change in approach towards the Palestinians and a change in attitude from the Palestinians. Biden has [previously faulted](#) President Mahmoud Abbas for not having “stepped up when given opportunities” and he has called for the PA to start laying the groundwork for peace. He has [demanded](#) the PA “acknowledge, flat-out, Israel’s right to exist – period – as an independent Jewish state and guarantee the borders” and stated it “must begin to level with their people about the legitimacy and permanence of Israel as a Jewish state in the historic homeland of the Jewish people”. The president has also shown an understanding – too often absent from discussions about the failure to achieve a two-state solution – of the [pernicious part](#) played by the PA’s support for incitement to violence. He has, for instance, [backed the Taylor Force Act](#) (which bars most aid to the PA for so long as it continues to pay “salaries” to those convicted of terrorist offences who are serving time in Israeli prisons) and [sharply criticised](#) school textbooks which glorify terrorism and violence (textbooks used in a curriculum which, to its shame, the UK government continues to fund). “No matter what legitimate disagreement they may have with Israel,” candidate Biden [argued last May](#), “it’s never a justification for terrorism, and no leader should fail to condemn as terrorists those who commit these brutalities.”

Biden knows too that Trump’s attitude towards the Palestinians – severing links with their leadership while cutting off all but a trickle of humanitarian assistance – was both cruel and counterproductive. Even before the latest outbreak of violence, the new administration was delivering on his campaign trail promise to “reengage the Palestinians”. Most importantly, the president has [formally recommitted](#) the US to backing a two-state solution. In practical terms, having first announced \$15m in covid-19 assistance to the Palestinians, in April, the US said it was restoring aid worth \$150m to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency. This will help support critical covid-19 assistance, including healthcare, medicine and medical supplies, as well as cash and food assistance to families severely impacted by the pandemic. UNRWA is in desperate need of reform, but the administration is surely right that such reforms are best argued for by states that are engaged with its work.

A further \$75m in economic development programmes in the West Bank and Gaza and \$10m for peace-building work – support for which was also inexplicably eliminated by Trump – has also been announced, part of the ground-breaking new Middle East Partnership for Peace Fund discussed in other chapters. Finally, the administration has also allocated \$40m in security assistance. In its totality, [as Blinken noted](#), the US aid package “provides critical relief to those in great need, fosters economic development and supports Israeli-Palestinian understanding, security coordination and stability”. Importantly, however, Biden is ensuring that, as he promised during the campaign, the new US support complies with the

terms of the Taylor-Force Act. Similarly, in the wake of last month's fighting, [Biden also pledged](#) to work with other nations to assemble a "major package" to rebuild Gaza, while making clear that that aid will not benefit Hamas and that Abbas, not the terror group, is the real leader of the Palestinian people.

There are tentative but encouraging signs that the administration's moves – which also include plans to reopen diplomatic missions in Jerusalem and Washington and the restoration of official contacts between the PA and the US – is eliciting a positive response and a more pragmatic attitude. Indeed, it is perhaps no coincidence that just days after Trump's defeat, Abbas restored security cooperation with Israel and the PA's diplomatic ties to Bahrain and the UAE, which were cut in the wake of the Gulf states' normalisation agreements with Israel.

There are also [reports](#) that the PA is considering plans to reform the terrorist salary payments, so they are based not on the lengths of a sentence – a measure designed to incentivise the most extreme acts of violence – but on the financial needs of the prisoners and their families. As [David Pollock and Sandy Gerber have argued](#), the Biden administration should use Abbas' desire for the US to reopen the PLO's mission in Washington – which was effectively closed by Trump – as leverage "to compel meaningful changes" to the so-called "pay for slay" policy.

IRAN IN THE BIDEN ERA

Undoubtedly the knottiest issue with which Biden must wrestle in the Middle East is Iran. The president has rightly recognised the failure of Trump's "maximum pressure" campaign which splintered the international coalition the US had so painstakingly constructed – exemplified by the failure last October to renew the UN's decade-long ban on the sale of conventional weapons to Iran – and led to a dramatic shrinking in the "breakout" time needed by the Islamic republic to amass enough enriched uranium to fuel a nuclear weapon.

But, as his campaign pledge to return the US to a "stronger and longer" nuclear deal suggested, Biden also understands the flaws in the original 2015 agreement, flaws which led to considerable and understandable Israeli unease. The president is right to want to address the "sunset" clauses in the JCPOA which, when they expire, will allow Iran to resume some banned nuclear enrichment activities. Biden has also made clear, [as Blinken put it in March](#), that the US has "fundamental problems with Iran's actions across a whole series of things, whether it is support for terrorism, whether it is a ballistic missile programme" which it wants to see a stronger agreement address.

Tehran's response to Biden's efforts to restart diplomacy and resurrect the JCPOA have been typically belligerent: it has severely curtailed the International Atomic Energy Agency inspectors' access to the country's nuclear sites, continued to breach limits on stockpiles of uranium and deploy advanced centrifuges banned by the deal, and demanded laughable amounts of financial compensation from the US. Iran has also demanded that, in return for its return to compliance with the JCPOA, all sanctions imposed since 2015 should be lifted – including many which relate to non-nuclear issues. As Dennis Ross, a former adviser to the Clinton and Obama administration, [recently suggested](#): "In effect, the Iranians are essentially saying that if you apply any sanctions on us for human rights or terrorism, we will engage in nuclear blackmail." Thankfully, the administration appears unwilling to bow to such tactics, indicating that it is [only willing to lift sanctions](#) that they consider "inconsistent" with the JCPOA – indeed, [in March Blinken announced](#) the imposition of new sanctions targeted against two Revolutionary Guard torturers – and that Tehran will receive [no relief until an agreement is concluded](#).

While there remain disagreements between Washington and Jerusalem, the public acrimony which accompanied the conclusion of the 2015 deal appears to be largely absent this time, with a joint US-Israeli strategy group [coordinating their efforts](#) to stop Iran acquiring nuclear weapons. Means, not ends

are the focus of any disagreement, Brett McGurk, the National Security Council's coordinator for the Middle East and North Africa, [suggested recently](#). "Where we have some disagreement internally there is no disagreement on where we want to go - Iran can never get a nuclear weapon, period," he argued. "There's some disagreement about the kind of tactics you might use to get there. But we agree on a lot more than we disagree." Biden's approach to Iran – one of cautious realism – thus far appears more appropriate and likely to produce positive outcomes than that deployed by Trump.

Biden has, of course, not yet been in office for six months. The economic and health emergency that he inherited will necessarily dominate the early stages of his presidency. This, combined with a lack of political leadership on both the Israeli and Palestinian sides, means that we are unlikely in the short to medium-term to see a major US-led peace initiative akin to the efforts made by both Bill Clinton and Barack Obama. Nonetheless, Biden is already demonstrating how a US administration should approach the search for a two-state solution. In so doing, the president is showing just what it means to be a pro-Israeli progressive. As he himself [once argued](#): "There is no contradiction between being progressive and being a supporter of Israel."

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“CHOOSING COMRADES”: SOLIDARITY IN THE MIDDLE EAST AND LABOUR’S FOREIGN POLICY

GARY KENT

Labour should seek to amplify the voices of allies in the region who share our values and adopt a policy of consistency towards human rights abuses.

There isn’t an Israeli-Palestinian conflict in the way that many outsiders seem to think, as the New York Times writer Matti Friedman [has argued](#). He says that zooming in to frame the problem “as an Israeli-Palestinian conflict makes as much sense as describing an ‘America-Italy conflict’ of 1944”. Friedman’s observation highlights Labour’s need to fully understand the complex mosaic of conflicts, interests, enemies and allies across the Middle East.

Despite its undoubted importance, the Middle East features less and less in western foreign policy. As if to underline this point, the UK government’s recent integrated review of security, defence, development and foreign policy [seeks](#) an Indo-Pacific tilt, although as the New Statesman’s Jeremy Cliffe [has suggested](#): “Global Britain will be decided not in the Indian Ocean or the South China Sea but in the Baltic, Black Sea and the Mediterranean.”

At the same time, deep popular disaffection with “forever wars” and the shale revolution that has made the US the world’s largest net oil and natural gas exporter is driving American disengagement from the region in favour of what Barack Obama once called “nation-building here at home”. That process – begun under Obama, entrenched under Donald Trump and likely to be continued by Joe Biden – also gave the green light to greater involvement by Russia and China. China’s recent \$400bn, 25-year [defence and economy pact](#) with Tehran could boost the longevity of the pestilential Iranian regime. However, the Biden administration faces increasing pressure to invest more heavily in the Middle East peace process.

THE CORBYN LEGACY

The recent Open Labour pamphlet, [A Progressive Foreign Policy for New Times](#), roots Corbynite foreign policy in anti-imperialist perspectives formed during the Cold War, national liberation struggles and opposition to repressive American interventions in the 1960s and 1970s. When the Soviet bloc collapsed in 1989, ending the “two-campist” division, a new binary – “the west against the rest” – emerged. It was subsequently reshaped and revitalised by military interventions, notably the Iraq war. The hard-left Stop the War Coalition (STWC), which Jeremy Corbyn chaired from 2011 to 2015, neglected conflicts not directly attributable to “the west”, reflecting an inability to see actors other than the US and its allies as having motives or powers. Moreover, its worldview couldn’t accommodate situations where western inaction, rather than western intervention, was decisive in unfolding violence. In Syria, it was almost wholly silent about the role of Russia or Iran, and even the Assad regime itself. This caused an impasse for Corbyn’s foreign policy, stricken by profound, but often unspoken, contradictions that were too deep to be solved in time to develop principled and strategic responses to new events.

This view largely explains why Corbyn – and, after his leadership victory in 2015, the Labour frontbench more generally – majored on issues within his ideological comfort zone, such as Palestine, Turkey and Yemen while ignoring the malign domestic and overseas agenda of the Iranian regime. It helps explain

why the Labour leadership [struck a distinctly ambivalent stance](#) during the 2017-18 protests throughout Iran. It tells us why the Kurds were largely abandoned when they fell victim to the machinations of the Islamic Republic and its proxy militias that bolstered a vengeful Baghdad government when it violently seized Kirkuk and sought to emasculate Iraqi Kurdistan in October 2017. Pro-western Kurds in Syria and Iraq, after all, simply didn't fit neatly into the hard left's Manichean view of the world. And it also throws light on Corbyn's studied silence on repression by forces such as Hamas and Hezbollah, as well as the disastrous demarche on Russia using a toxic weapon in Salisbury.

Deep divisions and differing ideological traditions between the hard left and Labour's mainstream were exemplified when Corbyn and his then shadow foreign secretary, Hilary Benn, spoke against each other in the House of Commons debate in December 2015 on allowing RAF jets to defend the Kurds from Islamic State in Syria. Benn, who resigned within a few months, framed military support for the Kurds within Labour's anti-fascist tradition. Open Labour rightly argues that "the response of the Stop-the-War left to each and every major conflict the world over typically represents little more than a nostalgia trip getting the band back together for one last riff on the Iraq years." It is high time for some new tunes on foreign policy.

AMPLIFYING THE VOICES OF ALLIES

Scholars of international relations once posited a billiard balls theory whereby hermetically sealed states occasionally hit others. This, however, ignored the complex skein of relations that is more like a spider web. The Kurds, for instance, are about 40 million people in four countries that comprise half the population of the Middle East and North Africa. What happens in south-eastern Turkey and northern Syria affects those in Iran or Iraq.

But if nations are not homogenous billiard balls so internal actors can be our allies in helping to make the Middle East more free, progressive and democratic. There are huge challenges and much depends on a combination of internal leadership and external support. Labour, in opposition and in government, should, of course, talk with governments, but we should also seek to amplify the views of allies and like-minded actors.

These should include the likes of trade unionists, Saudi women's activists and Iranian dissidents. We should support self-determination, talking about the impact of Israel's occupation on the Palestinian people. But we should also talk about Hamas's atrocious human rights abuses, especially towards women and LGBT people, and the Palestinian Authority's [heavy-handed attitude](#) towards dissent and journalists.

Indeed, one of the most troubling aspects of the Corbyn years was the obsessive focus by many on the actions of Israel while wilfully neglecting the suppression of activists by both Hamas and the PA. The plight of the people of Gaza is appalling and the stringent measures put in place by Israel and Egypt following Hamas' violent coup in 2007 bear some of the responsibility. But placing the responsibility solely at the feet of Israel does not allow us to recognise how Hamas has terrorised not just Israelis but also Gazans themselves. Last year, for instance, Hamas military prosecutors in Gaza [charged three Palestinian peace activists](#) from the Gaza Youth Committee with "weakening revolutionary spirit" for their role in holding a video call with Israelis.

This is but one small example of the suppression of dissent in which Hamas excels. "Hamas security forces and militants regularly carry out arbitrary arrests and detentions," Freedom House [reported last year](#). "The court system overseen by Hamas generally fails to ensure due process, and in some cases civilians are subject to trial by special military courts." Freedom House noted, too, that Hamas applies the death penalty – 16 new death sentences were issued in 2020 – without due process or adequate

opportunities for appeal. Trade union activities are curtailed, freedom of assembly restricted and social media closely monitored, and journalists arrested, interrogated and, in some cases, beaten and tortured. “ Hamas makes little effort to address the rights of marginalised groups within Gazan society,” Freedom House argues, noting especially the position of women and LGBT+ Gazans.

Similarly, while Hezbollah represents a very real threat to Israel and the Israeli people, it is also a key player in upholding Lebanon’s corrupt and inept political system, the weakness of which it both encourages and benefits from. Thus when protests erupted in the country in 2019 calling for an overhaul of the political system, action to tackle the economic crisis and an end to government corruption, Hezbollah was [at the forefront](#) of the effort to crush them. Its chief, Hassan Nasrallah, both denounced the protests and then sent hundreds of supporters onto the streets to harass and attack the demonstrators. They were unleashed both in Beirut and in Hezbollah strongholds such as Tyre and Nabatieh, showing the degree to which the terror group feared being challenged on its own turf by a movement that had crossed Lebanon’s deep sectarian divides.

These are just a few examples of a multitude of issues which a values-driven, confident progressivism should concern itself with. A simple principle – one of consistency – should underpin this approach.

A practical model for how we might do this is Labour Friends of Iraq (LFIQ), which I helped to establish in 2004. It sought to unite those with opposing views on the 2003 war behind the cause of the fledgling Iraqi trade union movement. Once the biggest movement between Europe and Australia, it was almost completely crushed by Saddam Hussein’s brutal “republic of fear.” Saddam’s overthrow allowed the rebuilding of that movement. LFIQ worked with Iraqi unions to oppose a motion at the 2004 Labour party conference in favour of withdrawing British troops. The unions’ international representative explained that, while they hadn’t invited the troops in, they wanted a say over when they left. The unions feared that premature withdrawal would create a security vacuum that would suffocate Iraq’s democracy and civil society. The motion was easily defeated and the conference agreed an alternative motion, which encouraged Labour activists to park their differences in favour of helping the unions and the democratic process in Iraq. LFIQ’s achievement was to simultaneously critique the conduct of the occupation and put union solidarity on the agenda by challenging the STWC, which denied in theory what was happening in practice – the birth of a new non-sectarian labour movement – and whose leaders ratted on brave Iraqi comrades threatened and murdered by sectarian forces.

“THE CHOICE OF COMRADES”

By focusing almost entirely on the supposed evils of the west and, at best, ignoring, or, at worst, lionising those defined as friends because they are enemies of the west, the hard left cultivated the notion that the UK could do no good in the Middle East and encouraged non-intervention of all sorts. The usual mix of “Hands Off” and “Troops Out” slogans was frequently wheeled out at the expense of those who sought political and military support from the west. Clearly positive [successes](#) were routinely ignored.

But is it right that we take a backseat while millions seek justice in what can be seen as intractable conflicts? The decade-long Syrian civil war, in which tens of thousands have died and many more have been driven from their homes, reminds us that non-intervention can have a heavy price. The late doyen of international relations, Fred Halliday, further countered this in his book *100 Myths About the Middle East*. He argued that all Middle East states are modern creations, suggesting that: “The history of peoples is not national but cosmopolitan; not one, as nationalist myth would have us believe, of separate blocs gradually and belligerently getting to know each other, but of a constant process of cultural and commercial interaction, redefinition of boundaries and mutual enrichment.”

While there has never been a golden age of thoughtful left thinking on foreign policy, poor analysis has

been amplified by the inane bubbles of social media and in the reconfigurations after the end of the Cold War – the initial hubris, the emergence of Islamism and especially 9/11, the interventions in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, and a much more rudderless international political system.

A good starting point for rethinking left-wing foreign policy is the work of the veteran American political thinker, Michael Walzer. His seminal essay, [Can There be a Decent Left?](#), scorns the “rag-tag Marxism” that turns “world politics into a cheap melodrama, with all the villains dressed to look the part and one villain larger than life” rather than the advocacy of secular enlightenment, human rights and democratic government. He urges political responsibility when our values are attacked physically because we should join willingly and constructively in debates about how to defend the country. He concludes that “if we value democracy, we have to be prepared to defend it, at home, of course, but not only there.”

Walzer’s 2018 book, *A Foreign Policy for the Left*, is a magisterial “post-Marxist account of a more nuanced politics and a more open-ended search for allies”. He cites Ignazio Silone’s phrase – “the choice of comrades” – which challenges those who, in the aftermath of the invasion of Iraq, saluted “the Iraqi Maquis” which murdered union leaders and electoral registration officers or who have argued that “we are all Hamas”.

Our “choice of comrades” should instead be the region’s workers, women, youth, human rights activists, academics, environmentalists and small entrepreneurs. British activists who want to help such reformers are small in number but can make a difference. Solidarity is inevitably made difficult by language, distance, and diasporas. But many interlocutors speak English well and online methods developed during the pandemic will help.

When thinking about its future approach to the region in government, Labour should develop an integrated foreign, development and security policy focused on the hard work and long haul of advancing the rules-based and institutional frameworks that enable a stronger and more independent civil society, the rule of law and democracy. We should consider ways to provide technical assistance to encourage independent and professional journalism, increased government transparency, reliable statistics, training of public representatives, better education and universities, policy conferences and training overseas and in the UK, and boosting film sectors to diversify economies and help people’s stories go global. The British labour movement can complement this work by providing training, as I have seen Unison undertake in Kurdistan. Union acumen cannot be magicked out of thin air but national and international unions can do much to allow activists to apply lessons from abroad at home, and learn something themselves too.

Governments and voluntary groups are keen on securing third party validation. Diasporas should be listened to, with respect but caution. Older members, after all, left their homelands in distress and they may not always appreciate how they have changed in the intervening years and decades. Some others purporting to represent people back home have scant experience of life there and over-simplify situations without any responsibility to advance peaceful co-existence and because extreme stances better cut through and raise funds. New generations, however, are often keen to play a positive role. Solidarity activists must tread carefully. As Walzer writes, “support for dissidence does not mean support for every dissident position. Politics is the art of distinction.” Activists should therefore offer a mutually respectful partnership.

Activists need to show solidarity in emergencies while also engaging in an informed, two-way intellectual discourse with comrades of choice and like-minded governments about what is doable or desirable in any given situation.

The Middle East is vast and complex and Britain’s relationship with the region has often been fraught. We should therefore beware of those at home who respond to its challenges by offering placard-like slogans

and easy answers. But caution should not be an excuse for inertia or despair. Labour, and the left more widely, should instead engage in an effort to better understand how we can show solidarity – practical, not just rhetorical – to those in the region who share, and, often at great personal risk, wish to advance, our common values and principles.

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