

## PANELISTS DEBATE

### **John Andrews, Contributing Editor to *The Economist* and *Project Syndicate***

Thank you very much indeed, Volker. We have had a very good round of opinions here, but two things have surprised me. I thought Itamar would speak rather more about the Abraham Accords, so I am going to ask him a bit about that. Also, the country that no one has really referred to, except for me in passing, is Saudi Arabia. Egypt is the most populous Arab country, but one could argue that in some ways Saudi Arabia is now the most activist, I suppose is a good way to put it, under Mohammed bin Salman. If for example, Saudi Arabia were to join up to the Abraham Accords, that would be a huge gamechanger. Itamar, is that possible before 2030?

### **Itamar Rabinovich, Vice Chairman of the Institute for National Security Studies in Tel Aviv, former Israeli Ambassador to the US, former Chief Negotiator with Syria**

Before I respond, I would like to make a brief comment on what Volker just mentioned about connectivity as driving efforts to change the traditional geography of the region. Two of these aspiring regional powers, Iran and Turkey have been doing that. Iran is seeking a land bridge from the eastern periphery of the region to the Mediterranean. This is a driving element of its policy and it would go through Iraq, Syria directly or Syria, Lebanon. While Turkey and the game they played in Libya, the efforts to define economic zones in the Mediterranean to block the gas pipeline being laid, that Mona mentioned, from Egypt to Europe, is an interesting manifestation of this issue.

On the Abraham Accords, first of all, interestingly it is the only foreign policy success for the Trump administration. I am a huge critic of the Trump administration's domestic and foreign policy, but this is something that they accomplished, and they deserve credit for this. Second, from Israel's point of view, it is very important. I have been pleased during the last three days to hear how proud the official spokespersons of the United Arab Emirates are at these Accords and it is an achievement of their diplomacy. It is a very pleasant surprise for Israelis because our experience with Egypt and Jordan, the countries that made peace with Israeli before, is that they were always trying to conceal it or lower the profile and here is a country that is very proud of normalizing relations with Israel. I think that ultimately, it will prove to have a very important healing effect on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict because that and the larger Israeli-Arab conflict created something of an anti-Arab feeling in Israel that is an element in fomenting right-wing politics in the country. The open, warm peace with the United Arab Emirates, with Bahrain and now Morocco, will open up friendly environments to Israelis, although Covid is still a barrier to it, but I think you will see much larger movements of people to and for. There are three airlines flying between the United Arab Emirates and Israel now with several direct flights every day, and to Morocco, and I think that Israeli society will be

changed, transformed by this contact with friendly Arabs who just want to have a normal relationship. Ultimately, it is going to affect the Israeli outlook on the Palestinians. The Palestinians were initially angry with the Accords, they have calmed down.

**John Andrews**

What about the Saudi Arabian question?

**Itamar Rabinovich**

I am coming to the Saudis. They have been very helpful in all of this and Bahrain would not have moved without a nod from Saudi Arabia and they have opened their airspace to these flights between the United Arab Emirates and Israel.

**John Andrews**

There was a Saudi Arabian plan back in 2000, I think, for mutual recognition.

**Itamar Rabinovich**

Yes. I think the original Saudi Arabian plan has been outdated by events and Saudi Arabian diplomacy has since been moved on, but it is up to them. I think that they feel domestically that they are still not ready for that, whether they will be in the next nine years and what Saudi Arabian politics will look like, how many more princes will end up in prison hotels we do not know. It is a domestic Saudi Arabian question, not a larger issue.

**John Andrews**

Ebtesam, also with the Saudi Arabian question. Saudi Arabia recently said that foreign companies setting up in the Gulf region could have their regional headquarters in Saudi Arabia rather than, as it has been the custom, in Dubai for example. That struck me as being a slightly unfriendly act, but they are your neighbors and friends, so what is happening and is going to happen?

**Ebtesam Al-Ketbi, President and Founder of the Emirates Policy Center**

I will comment on the Abraham Accords first. It was certainly a gamechanger in the region and the United Arab Emirates took a bold step. However, the United Arab Emirates is a small country and slim, while Saudi Arabia has a lot of constraints. They are the custodians of the holy shrine and they have a huge population, that is conservative and some of them are also more fanatical Islamists. It is not an easy step, plus they have that King Abdullah initiative, the two-state solution and each of those signatories has been rewarded with something. Now, the Saudi Arabians are looking for their reward, whether it be the implementation of the King Abdullah initiative. We know that and we heard that, and Netanyahu was there and met with Prince Mohammed bin Salman. It was about to join the others but as I said the internal constraints are still preventing it. However, I also believe that if Trump was still there, they would be acting on that because Trump considered it a historic deal.

**John Andrews**

He still thinks he may get the Nobel Prize for it.

**Ebtesam Al-Ketbi**

We will see if they consider he deserves it.

Coming back to the other question. It is true we are an alliance but our interests are not identical, which is normal in international relations between states, competition is open, like Sheikh Mohammed said. They want to compete but at least those they choose, but still there are major companies that have not closed their offices in Dubai and the facilities that Dubai has provided are tremendous and huge. I believe that Saudi Arabia still needs a culture too, so they will but not now. This is part of a new project and this has been done, including Israel and I do not think it can be done without them.

**John Andrews**

Thank you, I will come back to you later.