

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

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ELHAM FAKHRO

Elham Fakhro's *The Abraham Accords: The Gulf States, Israel, and the Limits of Normalization* offers a groundbreaking and timely analysis of the 2020 normalization agreements between Israel, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and Bahrain—collectively known as the Abraham Accords. As the first major academic treatment of these accords, the book presents a comprehensive, incisive, and methodologically rigorous account of their genesis, negotiation processes, and far-reaching geopolitical consequences.

A research fellow at the Harvard Kennedy School's Belfer Center and an associate fellow at Chatham House, Fakhro brings deep expertise in Gulf politics. Drawing on extensive interviews with policymakers and regional stakeholders, she offers a richly textured critique. The book's analytical depth and accessible style make it an invaluable resource for scholars, policymakers, and students alike. However, its limited

engagement with grassroots perspectives and its silence on developments following Israel's devastating assault on Gaza in October 2023 modestly constrain its contemporary relevance. Still, its analysis of the accords' structural fragility—especially in light of Saudi Arabia's continued refusal to formally normalize ties with Israel—is both sobering and illuminating. While the argument that elite-driven agreements are unsustainable without popular support is not entirely novel, the book's enduring value lies in its close documentation of normalization from the vantage point of Gulf ruling elites.

Fakhro's central thesis is that the Abraham Accords, though framed as a strategic convergence of shared security interests, economic ambitions, and regional realignments, fundamentally fail by marginalizing the Palestinian issue. Rather than resolving or constructively addressing the roots of regional instability, they entrench a status quo defined by Palestinian dispossession and asymmetric power. The book persuasively argues that by privileging elite interests and U.S.-brokered diplomatic gains over justice and peace for Palestinians, the accords perpetuate cycles of violence and political disenchantment.

Structurally, the book is organized into six chapters, framed by an introduction and conclusion. Each chapter examines a distinct dimension of the accords: the historical trajectory of Gulf-Israel relations; the emergence of a new generation of Gulf leadership; the tactical role of the Trump administration; the rapid institutionalization of military and economic cooperation; the reputational strategies pursued by the UAE and Bahrain; and the wider implications for Palestinian agency and prospects for regional peace.

A critical theme running throughout is the break with the longstanding Arab consensus—embodied in the 2002 Arab Peace Initiative—which linked normalization with Israel to tangible progress toward Palestinian statehood. Fakhro deftly analyzes the political, ideological, and strategic transformations that enabled this rupture. Central to her account is the rise of younger, Western-educated Gulf rulers—figures like Mohammed bin Zayed in the UAE and Mohammed bin Salman in Saudi Arabia—who prioritize regime stability, selective modernization, and integration into the Western economic order over traditional commitments to Arab and

Islamic solidarity. Their realpolitik calculations—shaped by the perceived Iranian threat and the symbolic shock of Hezbollah’s 2006 military performance—facilitated the decoupling of normalization from Palestinian liberation.

Fakhro credits the Trump administration with seizing this opportunity, offering diplomatic and economic inducements while circumventing traditional channels of negotiation through figures like Jared Kushner. In doing so, the U.S. reframed peace-making as a series of transactional deals designed to advance immediate American, Israeli, and Gulf elite interests, rather than as part of a broader resolution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Among the book’s most original contributions is its analysis of “tolerance-washing”—the use of narratives around religious tolerance and modernization to obscure authoritarianism and human rights abuses. Fakhro illustrates how Gulf states deploy imagery of interfaith dialogue and multicultural celebration to curry favor with Western audiences while stifling dissent at home. These rhetorical strategies function within a broader reputational economy, through which Gulf regimes attempt to present themselves as progressive allies of the West, often at the expense of their own populations’ moral and religious sensibilities.

Particularly sharp is Fakhro’s critique of the role of firms like McKinsey in driving top-down neoliberal reforms. These reforms—marked by privatization, economic liberalization, and state-led modernization—have widened the gap between Gulf elites and their societies, deepening the region’s democratic deficit and eroding traditional social contracts.

To her credit, Fakhro does not overlook the widespread popular opposition to normalization. She highlights polling data from 2023 indicating that 96% of Saudis oppose normalization with Israel. This grassroots resistance is further reflected in consumer boycotts of Western brands linked to Israel (e.g., McDonald’s) and in recurring public protests, particularly in Bahrain. These expressions of discontent—though often suppressed—indicate that normalization remains deeply unpopular and that the “Arab street” has not been fully pacified.

The fragility of the accords became starkly apparent in the wake of Israel’s genocidal war on Gaza beginning in October 2023. Though

Fakhro refers to the conflict using more cautious terminology, she astutely observes that Gulf states were forced to scale back or freeze their cooperation with Israel to manage domestic outrage and avoid antagonizing Iran. This recalibration, she argues, reflects deeper questions of regime legitimacy: Gulf rulers must navigate a precarious path between appeasing Western allies and containing popular discontent. Her analysis of Saudi Arabia is especially instructive. Riyadh has thus far withheld formal normalization, demanding U.S. security guarantees and progress on Palestinian statehood—an indication of the monarchy's sensitivity to domestic and religious opposition.

The book excels in timeliness and analytical clarity, though its depth is sometimes uneven. It does not offer a sustained intellectual or cultural history of the Gulf's political transformation, nor does it interrogate how Gulf regimes reconcile their professed conservatism and Sunni religiosity with their embrace of Israel. While Fakhro notes the 1981 formation of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) in the context of the Iranian Revolution and the Iran-Iraq War, she leaves unexplored the deeper theological and geopolitical consequences of the GCC's increasing dependency on the United States. Nor does the book fully examine the internal evolution of Gulf elites. Fakhro observes that the new generation of rulers are unbound by the informal solidarities that constrained their predecessors—connections to their peoples, to the Palestinian cause, and to pan-Islamic and pan-Arab ideals—but she stops short of analyzing the ideological, educational, and economic shifts that produced this alienation. Why and how have these elites come to embrace Israel—long seen as a symbol of Western aggression and a regional adversary—with such ease? What accounts for their detachment from the region's history and from their societies' moral horizons? These remain pressing, unanswered questions.

Nevertheless, Fakhro succeeds in situating the Abraham Accords within a broader historical arc. She traces earlier episodes of normalization to the Oslo Accords of the 1990s, when Arab leaders, chastened by decades of military defeat and political failure, sought face-saving exits from the Palestinian impasse. The real rupture, she argues, occurred post-2006, when Gulf elites—emboldened by economic power and alarmed

by Iran's rising influence—saw in normalization a strategy to secure American protection, deflect internal calls for reform, and prepare their economies for a post-oil future. In this view, normalization is less a pursuit of regional peace than a tactic of dynastic survival. The accords thus emerge as instruments of what Fakhro calls “modernized tyranny”: regimes that consolidate power through surveillance, repression, neoliberal restructuring—and now, alignment with Israel as both local hegemon and broker of American favor.

In sum, *The Abraham Accords* is a compelling and thoroughly researched account that foregrounds the interests and calculations of Gulf elites without romanticizing their motives. Its greatest strength lies in its dissection of the political logic that has led Gulf states to sideline the Palestinian cause in favor of regime security, reputational capital, and economic transformation. Though the book could benefit from deeper cultural and ideological engagement, as well as a fuller treatment of post-2023 developments, it remains an indispensable resource. Fakhro offers a clear-eyed assessment of how the Gulf's turn to normalization is less a herald of peace than a symptom of regional decay—a triumph of elite interest over collective justice, and of performative diplomacy over principled solidarity. Unless anchored in a just resolution of the Palestinian issue and sustained by genuine regional consensus, the Abraham Accords, she warns, may ultimately prove more illusion than solution.

OVAMIR ANJUM
IMAN KHATTAB ENDOWED CHAIR OF ISLAMIC STUDIES
UNIVERSITY OF TOLEDO
TOLEDO, OH.