

Controversial Fraternity: Abrahamic Discourse as a Justification for Arab-Israeli Normalization

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Abstract

Over the course of the Arab-Israeli conflict, Islamist scholars affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood and its offshoots have disseminated anti-Jewish religious discourse based on selective interpretations of Quranic verses and prophetic traditions. This rhetoric contributed to the development of a negative perception of Jews among broad segments of the Arab public, who viewed the former as unacceptable partners for peace and normalization. From the Camp David Accords to the Abraham Accords, as Arab regimes gradually pivoted toward the signing of peace treaties with Israel, they advanced alternative religious discourses in order to justify their groundbreaking policies and counter the Islamist approach. Based on the narratives introduced by the Egyptian, Jordanian, and Emirati regimes through their leaders, clerics, and other official outlets, this article argues that the figure of Abraham and the accompanying “Abrahamic discourse” have been pivotal in these regimes’ campaigns to legitimize the shift from rivalry to normalization with Israel. By promoting the metaphor of Abraham as the common ancestor and unifying element of Islam and Judaism, Arab regimes have tapped into an effective mechanism to portray Jews as historical neighbors of the Muslims and to reconstitute a broader narrative of Islamic-Jewish coexistence in the Middle East as religiously lawful and even desirable.

Keywords: Israel, Egypt, Jordan, UAE, peace, normalization, Abraham, Islam, Islamism

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Introduction

On August 13, 2020, during an impromptu press conference given by Donald Trump and his associates in the Oval Office, the president revealed that a peace agreement known as “the Abraham Accord” had been concluded between Israel and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). A month later, when Bahrain announced that it would normalize relations with Israel, the treaty became known as the “Abraham Accords.”

White House staff picked the name as “a last-minute decision.”¹ The name was not chosen by President Trump himself, and may even have been selected against his initial preferences. When called upon by the president to explain the name of the accord, David Friedman, then the US Ambassador to Israel, stated that as the father of three monotheistic faiths – Christianity, Islam, and Judaism – no figure better symbolizes the potential for unity among these three great faiths than Abraham. In response, perhaps jokingly, the president remarked that he had wanted to name the agreement “the Donald J. Trump Accord” but refrained, believing the press would not view it favorably.²

Ambassador Friedman, who was extensively engaged in the behind-the-scenes formulation of the Abraham Accords, has poignantly described in his autobiography how he, as an American Jew, perceived the religio-historical significance of the agreement and its name:

I couldn't help but hearken back to the original rivalry between Jews and Arabs – the conflict between Abraham's two sons, Isaac and Ishmael [...] When Abraham died, we learn that Isaac and Ishmael reconciled and together buried their father in the Cave of Machpelah in Hebron. That reconciliation of some thirty-eight hundred years ago is now being re-created – by the descendants of Isaac and Ishmael – before our very eyes.³

1 Gabby Deutch, “The General Who Coined the Abraham Accords,” *The Circuit*, January 10, 2022, <https://circuit.news/2022/01/10/the-general-who-coined-the-abraham-accords/>

2 “President Trump Announces Peace Accord Between Israel and UAE,” *C-Span*, August 13, 2020, <https://www.c-span.org/video/?474778-1/president-trump-israel-uae-sign-peace-accord-white-house>

3 David Friedman, *Sledgehammer: How Breaking with the Past Brought Peace to the Middle East* (New York: Broadside Books, 2022), p. 213.

Yusuf al-'Utayba, the UAE's ambassador to Washington, concurred that the parties could not have come up with a better name.⁴ Indeed, the agreement's name reflected its architects' intuition about the importance of constructing a new narrative that would underscore the common historical-religious root of Muslims and Jews and counter attempts to undermine it. Since September 2020, the Abraham Accords have become a shared political idiom, fully integrated into the political discourse of the Middle East. Even the Biden Administration ultimately decided to adopt its predecessor's terminology after some hesitation.⁵ In the spirit of the Abraham Accords, female political leaders from the UAE, Bahrain, Morocco, and Israel signed the "Sarah & Hajar [Hagar] Accords" in 2023. This initiative, symbolically named after the matriarchs of the Abrahamic religions, was designed to elevate the role of women in Middle Eastern diplomacy and affirm their commitment to peace.⁶

As discussed in this article, the role of Abraham as a metaphor for Arab-Israeli and Muslim-Jewish rapprochement predates the Abraham Accords. In fact, previous peacemakers have made use of this metaphor throughout history. In the context of peace agreements between Arab countries and Israel, the figure of Abraham first appeared in the late 1970s in Egyptian president Anwar al-Sadat's campaign to legitimize his groundbreaking peace initiative; in the mid-1990s, it became a dominant motif in King Hussein Bin Talal's speeches in favor of Jordanian-Israeli normalization; and it was finally institutionalized in the early 2020s as the official name of the normalization agreements concluded between Israel and four Arab countries – the UAE, Bahrain, Morocco, and Sudan – with the support of the American administration. These concepts have become particularly affiliated with the UAE, which embraced Abrahamic discourse years before its direct engagement with the Abraham Accords as part of its broader agenda to combat radical Islam and promote religious tolerance.

The figure of Abraham has often featured in polemics both advocating and opposing

4 Deutch, "The General Who Coined the Abraham Accords."

5 Mike Wagenhiem, "Accord'ing to the State Department," *The Media Line*, September 6, 2021, <https://themedialine.org/top-stories/according-to-the-state-department/>

6 Rasha Abu Baker, "Female Political Leaders from Region Sign Historical Agreement to Advance Role of Women in Diplomacy," *Khaleej Time*, June 8, 2023, <https://www.khaleejtimes.com/uae/female-political-leaders-from-region-sign-historical-agreement-to-advance-role-of-women-in-diplomacy>

peace with Israel, as has religious discourse in general. Such rhetoric reflects the supremacy of Islam in contemporary Muslim societies. Yet, despite the frequent use of the metaphor of Abraham in Arab polemics on peace agreements with the Jewish state, it has received relatively little attention in academic literature: Shimon Shamir has discussed the terminology used by King Hussein of Jordan to glorify the shared Abrahamic heritage of Muslims and Jews,⁷ and I have addressed the issue in the context of the broader Arab discussion on the legitimacy of peace and normalization agreements with Israel.⁸ Several studies have provided different readings of Jewish, Christian, and Islamic myths and traditions concerning the Abrahamic family metaphor;⁹ other studies have examined the potential embodied by the figure of Abraham for interreligious dialogue between Jews, Christians, and Muslims.¹⁰

This study concentrates on points of transition from conflict to peace between Israel, with a particular eye to the first three Arab countries to have made peace with Israel – Egypt, Jordan, and the UAE. In doing so, it seeks to present a detailed analysis of the debate between Arab regimes and Islamist opposition forces over the metaphor of Abraham. The article is based on a wide range of sources, including religious rulings, speeches, press articles, propaganda pamphlets, and religious conferences. It adopts a comparative analytical approach in order to offer a broader view of the function of “Abraham” in Arab-Israeli conflict resolution and peacebuilding processes.

7 Shimon Shamir, *The Rise and Decline of the Warm Peace with Jordan: Israeli Diplomacy in the Hussein Years* (Tel Aviv: HaKibbutz HaMeuchad, 2012), pp. 129–130 [Hebrew].

8 Ofir Winter, *Peace in the Name of Allah: Islamic Discourses on Treaties with Israel* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2022).

9 Marc Gopin, *Holy War, Holy Peace* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 3–7; Anton Wessels, “Can the Children of Abraham be Reconciled? Ishmael and Isaak in the Bible and in the Qur’an,” in Jerald D. Gort, Henry Jansen, and Hendrik M. Vroom (eds.), *Religion, Conflict and Reconciliation: Multifaith Ideals and Realities* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2002), pp. 134–144; Reuven Firestone, *Children of Abraham: An Introduction to Judaism for Muslims* (Hoboken: Ktav Publishing House, 2001), pp. 6–12; Karl-Josef Kuschel, *Abraham: Sign of Hope for Jews, Christians and Muslims* (New York: Continuum, 1995).

10 Mohammed Abu-Nimer, “Religion, Dialogue, and Non-Violent Actions in Palestinian-Israeli Conflict,” *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society*, Vol. 17 (2004), pp. 491–511; Antii Laato, *Encounters of the Children of Abraham from Ancient to Modern Times* (Leiden: Brill, 2010).

Islam and the Jews: A Brief Overview

Since the emergence of Islam in the 7th century, Muslim perspectives towards Jews have been predominantly ambivalent in nature, characterized by a blend of antagonism, rejection, tolerance, and coexistence. These attitudes found expression in the Quran and the Hadith (Islamic tradition), and were subsequently manifested in the behaviors and prevailing perceptions of Arab-Muslim states and societies.

Islamic sacred sources may be divided into two periods regarding the attitude towards the Jews: an earlier, friendly period and a later, hostile one. The friendly period in Islamic-Jewish relations continued until shortly after the *hijra*, when the Prophet and the people of Medina – including some of the city’s Jewish tribes – signed treaties that set out the rights and the duties of the city’s inhabitants. The hostile and more eventful period in the relations between the Prophet and the Jews began after Muhammad realized that the Jewish tribes of Medina were unwilling to recognize his prophecy and join his new religion. As relations between the Muslims and Jews in the city soured, the treaties gradually crumbled, culminating in confrontation and a tragic fate for the Jews of the Arabian Peninsula.

Following the deterioration of the relations between Muhammad and the Jews, Islam began to differentiate itself from Judaism by altering religious observances borrowed from Jewish tradition, including changing the direction of prayer from Jerusalem to the Ka’ba in Mecca. In addition, while earlier Quranic verses mention the three Jewish forefathers – Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob – but not Ishmael, later verses present Abraham as a *hanif* (a monotheist unaffiliated with any particular faith, who renounced idolatry and submitted to the one God) and strengthen the status of Ishmael at the expense of Isaac. In the Quran, the story of Abraham’s sacrifice of his son (37:99–108) does not mention the son’s name; however, most Islamic commentators held that it was Ishmael rather than Isaac.¹¹

11 Saleem Ahmed, *Islam: A Religion of Peace?* (Honolulu: Moving Pun Publishers, 2008), pp. 87–88; Bahis Sedq, *The Quran Speaks* (Indianapolis: Dogear Publishing, 2013), pp. 176–191; Nissim Dana, *To Whom Does This Country Rightfully Belong?* (Ariel: Ariel University Press, 2013), pp. 36–48, 113–115, 134–136, 139, 171–174, 185, 191 [Hebrew]; Michael Lecker, *Muhammad and the Jews* (Jerusalem: Ben-Zvi Institute, 2014), pp. 65–75, 210–216 [Hebrew].

Indeed, the figure of Abraham, father of Ishmael and Isaac and the spiritual father and founder of the monotheistic faiths, has its own place in the complex of connections between Judaism and Islam. The story of Abraham is recounted in both the Bible and the Quran, albeit with different nuances. The biblical narrative focuses on Abraham's wife, Sarah, and his son, Isaac, while the concubine Hagar and her son Ishmael are secondary characters expelled to preserve Isaac's higher status. The Quran, on the other hand, reveres Hagar and Ishmael as ancestors of the Arab peoples. Ishmael is presented as the favorite son, and his expulsion is attributed to Sarah's jealousy.

In the context of contemporary relations between Muslims and Jews, the myth of Abraham may serve as a basis for either hostility or rapprochement. While the perception of Muslims and Jews as "the sons of Abraham" holds an implicit reference to ancient conflicts, it also symbolizes the triumph of monotheism over polytheism and the common origins of the two religions. The value of the myth of Abraham in promoting peace between his descendants is that it invites a reexamination of conceptions about the past, present, and future. Rather than as historic rivals, Jews and Muslims may see themselves as the descendants of a single forefather: "cousins" who quarreled and grew estranged but can now reconcile and restore their fraternal relations, as is natural and desirable.¹²

In addition to Islamic theological codes and religious traditions, Muslim dual attitudes towards Jews have been shaped by various factors, including political, cultural, and socioeconomic aspects. These factors have exhibited temporal and regional variations. From the early days of Islam until the decline of the Ottoman Empire, Muslim states imposed an annual poll tax, known as *Jizya*, on Jews and Christians, symbolizing their subordinate status and the perceived superiority of Islam. Jews in various parts of the Muslim world periodically faced persecution, violence, deportation, or coerced conversion to Islam. At the same time, as the "people of the book" (*ahl al-kitab*), Jews enjoyed a protected status (*ahl al-Dhimma*), guaranteeing their security, preservation of property, and communal autonomy in matters of worship, education, and taxation. Overall, Jewish

12 Gopin, *Holy War, Holy Peace*, pp. 3–7; Nathan C. Funk and Abdul Aziz Said, *Islam and Peacemaking in the Middle East* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2009), p. 220.

communities in Muslim lands experienced comparatively better treatment than their counterparts in Christian Europe, benefiting from greater security and attaining significant cultural and political influence within the majority society. Muslim rulers, who preferred to coexist with followers of other faiths as dhimmis and collect taxes from them, cited Q. 2:256 – “There is no compulsion in religion” – to justify this approach.

During the late 19th century, the advent of the Jewish-Zionist national movement in Palestine began to influence the perspectives of Muslim states and individuals regarding Jews. A significant number of Muslims, particularly Arab Muslims, came to understand Zionism as an extension of Western colonialism, associating Jews with the foreign influence from which they sought liberation. Starting in the 1920s, instances of violence and animosity towards both Zionist and non-Zionist Jews became increasingly prevalent in Arab and Muslim countries. Anti-Jewish sentiments and stances grew more widespread following the United Nations Partition Plan for Palestine, ratified on November 29, 1947. They further intensified in the wake of the 1948 and 1967 wars, as well as the subsequent Israeli occupation of allegedly Arab and Muslim territories, particularly the Islamic shrines in East Jerusalem. Nevertheless, despite Muslim solidarity with the Palestinian cause, a notable portion of Muslims in Palestine and the region demonstrated a degree of tolerance towards the Zionist movement and later Israel. Some even engaged in cooperation, albeit occasionally covertly, to advance political objectives and confront shared challenges.¹³

Religious clerics and scholars are the primary agents who shape the public’s religious perceptions, including of the evolving relations between Jews and Muslims. Religious scholars in the contemporary Arab world fall into two main categories: on one side are the scholars of “state Islam,” affiliated with Arab regimes and the religious establishments they control; on the other side are the Islamists, chief among them the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) and its branches in various Arab countries. These two groups strive to influence internal public opinion in alignment with their respective political orientations. They compete for the authority to determine which policies, domestic and

13 Moshe Ma’oz (ed.), “Introduction,” *Muslim Attitudes to Jews and Israel: The Ambivalences of Rejection, Antagonism, Tolerance and Cooperation* (Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, 2010), pp. 1–28.

foreign, conform to the tenets of Islam, and for the right to define the corpus of canonical texts and valid interpretations.¹⁴

While most political actors in Arab countries view themselves as believing Muslims, the religious establishment, funded and supervised by the state, promotes Islamic interpretations aimed at providing religious approval for the existing political order and for the decisions of the leaders, which are by definition subject to pragmatic constraints.¹⁵ By contrast, Islamists are characterized by the call to reinstate Islam as the exclusive reference for all aspects of life; they consider political activism as the primary means of promoting a radical vision that ultimately challenges the existing domestic, regional, and international political order. As opposition forces, Islamist movements are relatively free of the constraints of a ruling government and are actively interested in delegitimizing Arab regimes' pragmatic policies.¹⁶

From the foundation of the MB in 1928 to the present day, Islamists have refused to recognize the Jewish state and have rejected peace and normalization treaties with Israel based on a coherent set of arguments, including: (a) Palestine is inseparable from the Islamic nation (*umma*), and its liberation is a necessary step on the way to the anticipated reestablishment of this nation; (b) Palestine – and especially Jerusalem – is an Islamic *waqf* that belongs to Muslims until Judgment Day, and it is prohibited to concede even an inch of it; (c) jihad to liberate Palestine is an individual duty (*fard 'ayn*) incumbent upon every capable Muslim; and (d) the state of Israel presents a military, cultural, and economic threat to its neighbors because it is a Western imperialist proxy designed to harm the physical unity of Islamic civilization as well as its identity, values, and beliefs.

14 Gurdun Kramer and Sabine Schmidtke, "Introduction: Religious Authority and Religious Authorities in Muslim Societies: A Critical Overview," in Gurdun Kramer and Sabine Schmidtke (eds.), *Speaking for Islam: Religious Authorities in Muslim Societies* (Leiden: Brill, 2006), pp. 1–14.

15 Samuel J. Rascoff, "Establishing Official Islam? The Law and Strategy of Counter-Radicalization," *Stanford Law Review*, Vol. 64, No. 125 (2012), p. 130.

16 Uriya Shavit, *Islamism and the West: From "Cultural Attack" to "Missionary Migrant"* (New York: Routledge, 2014), p. 3; Olivier Roy, *Globalised Islam: The Search for a New Ummah* (London: Hurst, 2002), p. 58.

Another oft-heard Islamist argument, addressed in depth by this essay, maintains that Jews are unacceptable partners for peace because they have been historical enemies of Muslims since the time of the Prophet, they are violators of contracts, and they possess innate negative characteristics, including malice, greediness, and treachery.¹⁷ These claims are based on carefully selected Quranic verses and prophetic traditions. Such demonization of Jews was prevalent in Islamist discourse in Egypt, Jordan, and the UAE, and widely accepted by segments of their societies throughout the conflict. However, as these three countries made peace with Israel, their regimes and affiliated religious establishments opposed such demonization, instead introducing an alternative Abrahamic discourse.

The Polemic in Egypt and Jordan Over the Abrahamic Peace Discourse

Egypt and Jordan were the two pioneering Arab countries to make peace with Israel, and therefore the first to have to manufacture broad public legitimacy for these policies in the face of Islamist and other objections. In order to win broad popular support, leaders of both countries had to remain loyal to predominant beliefs and values in their countries; they resorted to Abrahamic discourse to provide Islamic-religious sanction to their political moves.

While the use of the metaphor of Abraham in the context of the Egyptian-Israeli peace settlement was sporadic and unsystematic, it was nevertheless present. Its powerful potential to strike a conciliatory tone was first exemplified as early as Anwar Sadat's historic address at the Knesset on November 20, 1977, in which he highlighted the close connection between Judaism and Islam. The Egyptian president asked Knesset members to take inspiration from God's words as spoken by the prophet Zechariah in the biblical verse that enjoins believers to "love truth and

17 'Abd al-Fattah Muhammad al-'Awaysi, *Tassawur al-Ikhwan lil-Qadiyya al-Filastiniyya* [The Muslim Brotherhood and the Question of Palestine] (Cairo: Dar al-Tawzi' wal-Nashr al-Islamiyya, 1989), pp. 11, 13–21, 25–43; Muhammad Muru, *Al-Haraka al-Islamiyya fi Misr* (Cairo: Al-Dar al-Misriyya lil-Nashr, 1994), pp. 152–153; Uriya Shavit and Ofir Winter, *Zionism in Arab Discourses* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016), pp. 32–35.

peace” (Zechariah 8:19), and quoted a verse from the Quran (3:84) that recognizes Abraham and other the Jewish prophets: “Say [Muhammad]: ‘We [Muslims] believe in God and in what has been sent down to us and to Abraham, Ishmael, and Isaac, Jacob and the Tribes. We believe in what has been given to Moses, Jesus, and the prophets from their Lord. We do not make a distinction between any of them. It is to Him that we devote ourselves.’”¹⁸

In some of his public statements, Sadat called Jews and Muslims “cousins.”¹⁹ According to his wife Jehan, these were not empty words; Sadat’s desire for peace with Israel was born of something more profound than mere pragmatism. As a religious Muslim, he “believed that Arabs and Jews are brothers, sons of Abraham descended from Ishmael and Isaac, and that they should be reconciled.”²⁰ During the peace talks, Sadat proposed the establishment of a spiritual center for members of the three monotheistic faiths on Mount Sinai (*Jabal Musa*), where a synagogue, mosque, and church would be built side by side, that would serve as a symbol of peace and brotherhood among the Abrahamic religions.²¹

In an official ruling issued after the signing of the peace treaty with Israel, Egyptian Mufti Jad al-Haqq ‘Ali Jad al-Haqq argued that Islam’s general messages of peace were also valid in the case of the Jews, who are “people of the book” and should be granted protected status. He quoted the Quranic verse (5:5): “The food of the People of the Book is lawful for you as your food is lawful for them,” and mentioned the Charter of Medina between the Prophet Muhammad and the Jews of that city. This discourse not only challenged the Islamist conception of Jews as the eternal, historical enemies of Islam, but

18 *Mubadarat al-Salam Allati Qama biha al-Ra’is Muhammad Anwar al-Sadat* [The Peace Initiative of President Muhammad Anwar al-Sadat] (Cairo: Wizarat al-Kharijiyya, 1979), p. 169. Sadat recognized the historic roots of the Jewish people on other occasions as well; see: Anwar al-Sadat, *Anwar al-Sadat on War and Peace, 1970–1980*, ed. by Rafi Israeli (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1982), pp. 105–107 [Hebrew]; Anis Mansur, “Radd al-Sadat fi 300 Kalima” [Sadat’s Response in 300 Words], *Uktubir*, August 31, 1980, p. 9.

19 Harry Hurwitz and Yisrael Medad (eds.), *Peace in the Making* (Jerusalem: Gefen, 2011), p. 209.

20 Jehan Sadat, *My Hope for Peace* (New York: Free Press, 2009), p. 124.

21 Shimon Shamir, *A Newly-Plucked Olive Leaf: The Story of the Israeli Academic Center in Cairo* (Tel Aviv: The Haim Rubin Tel Aviv University Press, 2016), pp. 368–373 [Hebrew]; *Sinai: Land of the Heavenly Religions* (Cairo: State Information Service, 1980), pp. 3, 24–25.

also implicitly suggested that peace with the Jewish state was religiously valid.²²

As a result of the mutually beneficial relations that Sadat had forged with the MB to offset Nasserist influence since the beginning of his presidency in October 1970,²³ the movement's opposition to his Jerusalem visit was initially restrained. Nevertheless, *Al-Da'wa*, the MB's mouthpiece, stressed the Jewish enemy's demonic nature and its ramifications for the religious, historical, and eternal character of the conflict with Israel.²⁴

After the Camp David Accords were signed in September 1978, the MB's tone grew even harsher as peace with Israel became an emerging reality. 'Umar al-Tilmisani, the MB's General Guide from 1972 to 1986, ruled that Islamic law forbids Muslims from accepting the usurpation of their land and obligates them to fight for its liberation.²⁵ Following the signing of the peace agreement on March 26, 1979, *Al-Da'wa* published an article by the Islamic scholar 'Abd al-Halim 'Awis (1943–2011) entitled *The Jews' Nature Prevents Them from Living in Peace with Others*. In the article, 'Awis detailed his impressions of the Jews based on Adolf Hitler's *Mein Kampf* and the Quran, "which preceded [Hitler] by 1,400 years."²⁶

The MB also criticized Sadat's initiative to establish a religious complex for the Abrahamic faiths based on religious arguments. Muhammad 'Abd al-Quddus, a columnist affiliated with the movement, wrote in *Al-Da'wa* that such a center violated the Quran's directives. A Muslim, he argued, is not allowed to build a church or a synagogue (e.g., Q. 3:85), and may not tolerate Christianity and Judaism, or a church and a synagogue, to be

22 Yitzhak Reiter, *War, Peace and International Relations in Contemporary Islam: Fatwas on the Topic of Peace with Israel* (Jerusalem: Jerusalem Institute for Policy Research, 2008), pp. 95-97, 104 [Hebrew].

23 Robert Solé, *Al-Sadat [Sadat]* (Beirut: Nawfal, 2015), pp. 109–114; Thomas W. Lippman, *Hero of the Crossing* (Nebraska: Potomac Books 2016), pp. 234–235.

24 "Lil-Da'wa Kalima: Filastin Qadiyya Islamiyya" [al-Da'wa Editorial: Palestine Is an Islamic Cause], *Al-Da'wa*, Vol. 19 (December 1977), p. 15.

25 'Umar al-Tilmisani, "Al-Ikhwān al-Muslimūn: Kayfa Yantaqidun.. wa-Limadha Yu'aridun?" [The Muslim Brotherhood: What Is Their Criticism and Why Do They Reject?], *Al-Da'wa*, Vol. 30 (November 1978), pp. 4-5.

26 'Abd al-Halim 'Awis, "Al-Yahud Qadimūn: Ha'ula'i Humma Banu Isra'il: Tiba' al-Yahud Tamna'ahum min al-'Aysh fi Salam ma'a Ghayrihim" [The Jews Are Coming: These Are the Children of Israel: The Jews' Nature Prevents Them from Living in Peace with Others], *Al-Da'wa*, Vol. 42 (November 1979), pp. 37-39.

placed on the same level as Islam and a mosque (e.g., Q. 4:171).²⁷ In any case, Sadat was assassinated in October 1981 before he could fulfill this vision.

In October 1994, about 15 years after the first Arab-Israeli peace agreement, Jordan and Israel signed a second agreement. The attempt to revive positive aspects of the historical relations between Muslims and Jews – an aspect that was relatively marginal in the Egyptian peace discourse – played a central role in the rhetoric of the Jordanian monarchy. Facing Islamist criticism, King Hussein bin Talal championed the metaphor of Abraham. The implication was that peace between Jordan and Israel had revived the ancient blood ties between two brothers, sons of a single forefather.²⁸

Jordan's and Egypt's references to the mythos of Abraham reflected the two countries' disparate concepts of the nature of peace with Israel. Whereas, from the early stages, Egypt felt more comfortable with a limited "cold peace," King Hussein initially believed that in order to reap the fruits of peace and translate normalization into concrete economic benefits, it would be essential to foster "warm" interpersonal relations. To this end, he advanced the narrative that peace with the Jews was a renewal of the fraternity between two religions that were born in the same geographical area, shared common roots and a similar religious-cultural heritage, and had a long history of friendly relations worth restoring.²⁹

At the time, King Hussein used the phrase "children of Abraham" in many of his speeches. For example, he spoke of realizing his grandfather King 'Abdullah's dream to forge peace between the children of Abraham,³⁰ claiming that the shared roots of the two "sons" called for person-to-person connections between their countries.³¹ At the signing ceremony for the peace treaty on October 26, 1994, the king prophesied that all

27 Muhammad 'Abd al-Quddus, "Limadha Nu'aridu Fikrat Mujamma' al-Adyan" [Why We Are Against the Idea of the Religious Complex], *Al-Da'wa*, Vol. 44 (January 1980), pp. 20–21.

28 Riad Nasser, *Recovered Histories and Contested Identities: Jordan, Israel and Palestine* (Plymouth: Lexington Books, 2011), pp. 131–133.

29 Shamir, *The Rise and Decline of the Warm Peace with Jordan*, p. 129.

30 Ahmad Muhammad Al-Qudah (ed.), *Ma'rakat al-Salam: Watha'iq Urdunniyya* [The Battle for Peace: Jordanian Documents] (Amman: Manshurat Da'irat al-Matbu'at wal-Nashr, 1994), pp. 75–76.

31 Al-Qudah (ed.), *Ma'rakat al-Salam*, pp. 101–102.

the children of Abraham – Jordanians, Israelis, Arabs, and Palestinians – would remember that moment as the “dawning of the new era of peace, mutual respect between us all, tolerance and the coming together of people of generations to come beyond this time to build and achieve what is worthy of them.”³² With respect to Jerusalem, King Hussein expressed his wish for the holy sites to be above exclusive Palestinian or Israeli national sovereignty, and to act as a symbol of peace among the children of Abraham.³³

King Hussein’s brother, Crown Prince Hassan bin Talal, assessed that interfaith and intercultural dialogue would help to foster mutual understanding between Jordan and Israel. To this end, he established a center for religious studies in Amman as a framework through which to find common ground among the three monotheistic faiths and bridge the gaps between them. He also proposed issuing a joint declaration by Jewish, Muslim, and Christian representatives that would set out norms for global trade among members of the three religions based on shared religious and moral principles such as justice, mutual respect, and fairness. Such a declaration, he felt, would help refute the Islamist warnings that Israel was bound to exploit the normalization with Jordan to advance its nefarious “conspiracies.”³⁴

The king’s friendly relations with Israeli prime minister Yitzhak Rabin, who had served as chief of staff of the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) and defeated Jordan during the 1967 war, provided a living example of a reversal that was actually a return to the original natural order. Rabin was assassinated in November 1995, by a Jewish citizen opposed to the Oslo Accords that he had signed with the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO), after he addressed a Tel Aviv rally in support of his peace policies. In Hussein’s eulogy at Rabin’s funeral, the king quoted Q. 41:34: “Your enemy will become as close as an old and valued friend.” His words were directed not only to Rabin’s family and to the world leaders gathered at the Mount Herzl national cemetery, but also to his people – his

32 “Address by King Hussein of Jordan at the Signing Ceremony of the Treaty of Peace between the State of Israel and the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, October 26, 1994,” https://content.ecf.org.il/files/M00637_HusseinSpeechSigningIsraelJordanPeaceTreatyEnglish.pdf

33 Ibrahim Nafi’, *Al-Ahram*, February 19, 1995, http://www.kinghussein.gov.jo/95_feb19.html

34 Ahmad Muhammad al-Qudah (ed.), *Ma’rakat al-Salam: Al-Juz’ al-Thani* [The Battle for Peace: Part Two] (Amman: Manshurat Da’irat al-Matbu’at wal-Nashr, 1994), pp. 217–218, 256–257, 261–270.

supporters and his Islamist rivals alike. He proceeded to affirm: “We believe that our one God wishes us to live in peace and wishes peace upon us, for these are His teachings to all the followers of the three great monotheistic religions, the children of Abraham.”³⁵

For its part, the Jordanian MB was outraged by the king’s use of the phrase “children of Abraham” to refer to the Jews. Yusuf al-‘Azm (1931–2007), one of the movement’s leaders, rejected this based on Q. 3:67 – “Abraham was neither a Jew nor a Christian. He was upright and devoted to God, never an idolater” – and wondered how a Muslim could question a Quranic verse and twist its meaning. “Abraham was not a Jew,” he stressed, “and therefore the Jews are not the children of Abraham, but emblematic examples of transgressors who uttered lies about [Abraham] and blasphemed against him and his God.”³⁶

The MB also highlighted the distinction made in the Quran between the “children of Israel,” whom Allah favored, and “the Jews.” An article in their weekly newspaper *Al-Sabil* explained that “Israel” was another name for Jacob, son of Isaac, son of Abraham, a virtuous man who had no affinity whatsoever with the Jews but rather cursed them, refused to recognize them, and declined to join their faith. According to the article, Prophet Muhammad called the Jews “the descendants of apes and swine,” not “our cousins” or “fellow children of Abraham!”³⁷

In both Egypt and Jordan, the regime and its Islamist rivals maintained a heated debate on the question of relations between Muslims and Jews. While both Sadat and Hussein deployed the figure of Abraham as a metaphor for fraternity with the Jews, Jordan’s more frequent and intense usage of this concept reflected the Jordanian inclination at the time to build warmer peace and wider normalization with Israel. Islamists from both countries, on their part, opposed their governments’ attempts to legitimize normal, friendly relations with the Jews in preparation for rapprochement with the Jewish state.

35 “Eulogies at the Funeral of Prime Minister Rabin,” November 6, 1995, <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/eulogies-at-the-funeral-of-yitzhak-rabin>

36 Yusuf al-‘Azm, “Qala Ta’ala: ‘Ma Kana Ibrahim Yahudiyyan...’” [Allah said: Abraham Was Not a Jew], *al-Sabil*, October 25–31, 1994, p. 2.

37 Sallah ‘Abd al-Fattah al-Khalidi, “La Taqulu: Isra’ il” [Don’t Say “Israel!”], *al-Sabil*, November 15–21, 1994, p. 30.

The Abraham Accords and Their Counter-Narrative

Years before the Abraham Accords, the UAE had already aimed to position itself as a stronghold of peace and tolerance.³⁸ In a bid to present an ideological alternative to Islamic radicals, it has worked since the beginning of the present millennium to promote religious tolerance in its domestic and foreign agenda. The main objective of this discourse is to maintain the status quo. On the domestic level, tolerance is perceived in the UAE not only as a religious value, but also as a guarantee of stability in a country inhabited by members of 200 nations with different religions. On the regional level, such discourse supports the preservation of the Middle East's nation-state order in the face of alternative transnational Islamist and salafi-jihadist agendas. On the international level, messages of tolerance promote the UAE's image as a beacon of religious moderation.

The UAE described this ethos in a 2016 document titled "The National Tolerance Program," aimed at positioning the UAE as the "global capital of tolerance." The country also enacted measures to realize its peaceful vision. In 2017, it established the Ministry of Tolerance and Coexistence; 2019 was declared the "year of tolerance." Reformist messages promoting tolerance and compassion and renouncing extremism and violence began to be circulated on state religious and cultural platforms: in Friday sermons at the mosques, in Islamic studies curricula in schools, and in popular media. The country also supported a network of new Islamic institutions in order to promote its anti-radical religious agenda at home and abroad.³⁹

The UAE has emphasized activities that foster dialogue and coexistence among the Abrahamic faiths – Islam, Christianity, and Judaism – which are presented as rooted in a common heritage of tolerance, non-violence, and fraternal relations. In a permanent exhibition on world religions in the Louvre Abu Dhabi, which opened in 2017, the

38 "UAE Cabinet Approves National Tolerance Program," *Cabinet of the United Arab Emirates* (n.d.), <https://uaecabinet.ae/en/details/news/uae-cabinet-approves-national-tolerance-program>

39 Mariam Alhashmi, Naved Bakali, and Rama Baroud, "Tolerance in UAE Islamic Education Textbooks," *Religions*, Vol. 11, No. 8 (2020), p. 377; Aseel Zibin and Abdulrahman Dheyab Abdullah, "The Conceptualization of Tolerance in the UAE Press Media: A Case Study of 'The Year of Tolerance,'" *Open Linguistics*, Vol. 5 (2019), pp. 405–420.

Quran, the New Testament, and the Jewish Bible are displayed side by side. Giving equal prominence to Islam's holy book and to the scriptures of other religions would have previously been regarded as an insult to Islam; indeed, Islamist currents have criticized such policies.⁴⁰

In 2019, the UAE announced plans to build a joint religious complex in Abu Dhabi – including a mosque, a church, and a synagogue called the Abrahamic Family House – reminiscent of the spiritual center Sadat planned to build on Mount Sinai. The three houses of prayer, which opened to visitors in March 2023, symbolize mutual understanding, harmonious coexistence, and world peace among the believers of the three monotheistic faiths. Their purpose is to create a point of meeting and mutual learning between the believers of the Abrahamic religions, to establish an everyday ethos of interreligious dialogue, and to strengthen the UAE as a global bastion of tolerance by attracting tourists from around the world.

While the Moses Ben Maimon synagogue at the Abrahamic Family House was the first synagogue to officially be opened in the UAE, public Jewish communal life has gradually developed in the country since 2018.⁴¹ Following the Abraham Accords, Jewish community initiatives were expanded to include the development of educational facilities, the opening of kosher restaurants, the construction of mikvehs and cemeteries, and the reception of new rabbis from abroad.⁴² Clerics affiliated with the regime defended these trends, saying that they promoted coexistence among the faiths and reject binary perceptions of “believers” versus “unbelievers.”⁴³

40 Katie Wachsberger, “Religious, Social and Cultural Tolerance in the UAE,” *The Forum for Regional Thinking*, November 24, 2019, <https://www.regthink.org/articles/religious-social-and-cultural-tolerance-in-the-uae> [Hebrew].

41 Yoel Guzansky and Ofir Winter, “Apolitical Normalization: A New Approach to Jews in Arab States,” *INSS Insight*, No. 1332, June 8, 2020, <https://www.inss.org.il/publication/judaism-in-the-arab-world/>

42 Yoni Michanie, “Meet the Rabbi Who Made It Possible to Live a Jewish Life in the UAE,” *JNS*, October 4, 2022, <https://www.jns.org/meet-the-rabbi-who-made-it-possible-to-live-a-jewish-life-in-the-uae/>

43 Wasim Yusuf, “Hal Yajuzu Bina’ Masjid wa-Kanis Yahudi bi-Janibi Ba’ dihim? Wa-Limadha Summiya bil-Bayti al-Ibrahimi?” [Is it Permissible to Build a Mosque, a Church, and a Jewish Synagogue Side by Side? And What is the Origin of the Name ‘House of Abraham?’], YouTube [Official Channel of Sheikh Wasim Yusuf], January 23, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Xyjmbu22MCA&list=PLpLS1TIWsPOTJfulWnG-IN6Q20B6ok79v&index=7>

The UAE's discourse of tolerance and moderation was not meant to prepare the ground specifically for the Abraham Accords. However, it nevertheless laid down a religious-ideological infrastructure that facilitated the promotion of the agreement and its acceptance in Emirati public opinion. Hence, the September 2020 Abraham Accords were introduced from the outset as a bridge between countries as well as religions. Their official announcement promised that "all Muslims who come in peace may visit and pray at the Al-Aqsa Mosque, and Jerusalem's other holy sites should remain open for peaceful worshippers of all faiths."⁴⁴

Israel and the UAE pledged to establish friendly diplomatic relations at the festive signing ceremony on the White House lawn in September 2020. The agreement articulates the two states' recognition that "the Arab and Jewish peoples are descendants of a common ancestor, Abraham." Alongside concrete commitments to normalize relations in various areas, the sides promised in Article 6 to "undertake to foster mutual understanding, respect, coexistence and a culture of peace between their societies in the spirit of their common ancestor, Abraham."⁴⁵ 'Abdullah bin Zayed Al Nahyan, the Emirati foreign minister, supported the reference to the figure of Abraham in the agreement; this use is meant to imply that both the Arab-Israeli conflict and its solution are being rightly treated in the framework of history, religion, and culture.⁴⁶

Contrary to traditional Islamist perceptions, religious scholars affiliated with the regime argued that the Jews are in fact legitimate and desirable partners for peace agreements with the Muslims, as they are fellow descendants of Abraham. Sheikh

44 "Joint Statement of the United States, the State of Israel, and the United Arab Emirates," *U.S. Embassy in Israel*, August 13, 2020, <https://il.usembassy.gov/joint-statement-of-the-united-states-the-state-of-israel-and-the-united-arab-emirates>

45 "Abraham Accords Peace Agreement: Treaty of Peace, Diplomatic Relations and Full Normalization Between the United Arab Emirates and the State of Israel," *The Trump White House*, September 15, 2020, <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefings-statements/abraham-accords-peace-agreement-treaty-of-peace-diplomatic-relations-and-full-normalization-between-the-united-arab-emirates-and-the-state-of-israel/>

46 Barak Ravid, "UAE Foreign Minister: Not Worried About Changing Governments in Israel, the Enthusiasm for the Agreement Continues," *Walla!*, June 29, 2021, https://news.walla.co.il/item/3445077?utm_campaign=socialbutton&utm_content=whatsapp&utm_medium=sharebutton&utm_source=whatsapp&utm_term=social [Hebrew].

‘Abdullah bin Bayyah, acting in his capacity as head of the UAE Fatwa Council and the Abu Dhabi Forum for Peace (*Muntada Ta‘ziz al-Silm fil-Mujtama‘at al-Muslima*), founded in 2013 and comprised of religious figures from across the world, justified peace as a manifestation of the human values common to all religions. At a conference initiated by the US State Department in collaboration with the Abrahamic Initiative Forum (an organization founded by the Vatican in December 2020), Bin Bayyah declared that the Abrahamic faiths share universal values that form the basis for peace between nations. The principal objectives of Islamic law essentially constitute human dignity, he said, and are important to all faiths and sects, particularly the Abrahamic ones.⁴⁷

Following the signing of the Abraham Accords, the Abu Dhabi Forum for Peace initiated several public lectures on the common ground shared by the Abrahamic faiths. Radwan al-Sayyid, a Lebanese professor emeritus of Islamic Studies, Dean of Graduate Studies and Scientific Research at the Muhammad Bin Zayed University for Humanities in Abu Dhabi, and Member of the Board of Trustees of the Abu Dhabi Forum for Peace, stressed that the three Abrahamic religions share identical values embodied in the figure of Abraham. These include freedom of belief, peace, mutual recognition, tolerance, support for international treaties, global citizenship, and sustainable development.⁴⁸ ‘Abdallah al-Sayyid Walad Abahu, a Mauritanian scholar and a columnist for the Emirati daily *al-Ittihad*, claimed that the Bible, the New Testament, and the Quran all emphasize the protection of basic human rights.⁴⁹

In May 2021, a Holocaust memorial exhibition was launched in Dubai’s Crossroad of Civilizations Museum. The exhibition, entitled “We Remember,” was the first of its kind in the Arab world and constituted a remarkable turning point in several respects:

47 “Ibn Bayyah Yushariku fi Multaqa al-Mubadara al-Ibrahimiyya” [Ibn Bayyah Participated in the Abrahamic Initiative Forum], *Al-Ittihad*, December 3, 2020, <https://bit.ly/3eXAgS4>

48 “Fadilat al-Duktur Radwan al-Sayyid Yulqi Muhadara bi-‘Unwan ‘Su‘al al-Qiyam fi Diyanat al-‘a‘ila al-Ibrahimiyya” [His Excellency Dr. Radwan al-Sayyid Gives a Lecture Entitled “The Question of Morals in the Religions of the Abrahamic Family”], *al-Silm*, Vol. 11 (2021), pp. 438–439.

49 “Fadilat al-Duktur ‘Abdallah al-Sayyid Walad Abahu Yulqi Muhadara fi Mawdu‘: al-Mushtarak al-Insani bayna Diyanat al-‘a‘ila al-Ibrahimiyya” [His Excellency Dr. ‘Abdallah al-Sayyid Walad Abahu Gives a Lecture on the Human Common Among the Religions of the Abrahamic Family], *al-Silm*, Vol. 11 (2021), pp. 435–437.

(a) it replaced the Holocaust denial prevalent in Arab discourse with a recognition of the tragedy experienced by the Jews during World War II; (b) it advanced empathy and sympathy towards the Jewish “other,” rather than the common approach of “competitive victimhood” between Israelis and Palestinians; and (c) it offered Emirati Muslims an innovative space for facts-based, humane engagement with the most painful chapter in Jewish history.

The exhibition tells the story of Nazi Germany’s persecution of Jews, from Kristallnacht to the implementation of the Final Solution. It includes photos and exhibits honoring the memory of Anne Frank and the 1.5 million Jewish children murdered in the Holocaust, as well as the personal testimonies of Israeli Holocaust survivors. As an exhibition held in a Muslim country, it pays special tribute to Muslims who rescued Jews during the Holocaust. For instance, it recounts the story of Jewish refugees in Albania in 1943 who were embraced by Albania’s Muslim community. It also narrates the heroic story of Muhammad Hilmi, an Egyptian doctor residing in Berlin who saved several Jewish lives, and in 2013 became the first Arab to be granted the status of “Righteous among the Nations” by Yad Vashem. The exhibition’s primary message is one of mutual respect, human compassion, and hope for the future.

In the main hall of the exhibition, the Quranic verse “...whoever saves one life saves the entire world” (5:32) is presented in Arabic, Hebrew, and English. Another exhibit relates to a statement made by the Emirati foreign minister, who praised the “noble human values of coexistence, tolerance, acceptance of others, and respect of all religions and beliefs” during a joint visit with his Israeli counterpart to the Holocaust memorial in Berlin in October 2020.

A large, colorful mural created by Israeli and Emirati artists graces the museum courtyard. It shows two young men, an Emirati and an Israeli, talking and sipping coffee together, with the sunset and the skyscrapers of Dubai and Tel Aviv in the background. Above them, as a symbol of their shared heritage as descendants of Abraham, the word “cousins” appears in Arabic and Hebrew.⁵⁰ In its first two years of existence, some 6,000 people have visited

50 Ofir Winter, “The Gulf: Discovering the Past, Building a Future – The United Arab Emirates,” *The Center for the Study of Contemporary European Jewry*, 2022, <https://cst.tau.ac.il/publications/the-gulf-discovering-the-past-building-a-future-the-united-arab-emirates/>

the Holocaust memorial exhibition. According to the museum's founder Ahmad 'Ubayd al-Mansuri, who served as an Emirati parliament member from 2011 to 2015, Arab visitors, who were around half of those who visited, were mostly schoolchildren.⁵¹

Emirati Islamists, on their part, criticized the state's political and religious Abrahamic discourse by claiming that the Jews are the Muslims' historical enemies and therefore cannot be regarded as legitimate partners for peaceful, normal relations with Muslims. Exiled Emirati dissident Sa'id al-Tunayji, a co-founder of the al-Islah Association, the MB's branch in the UAE (banned in 2014), and a co-founder of the Emirati Association Against Normalization, wondered how the "normalizers" could trust the Jews, the "killers of the prophets," and make peace with a people whose history, he said, is based on aggression against the prophets and all the world's nations. In an article he authored, al-Tunayji called the Jews the enemies of the believers and listed massacres attributed to the Jews and modern Israel. These massacres, he claimed, reflect their "barbaric doctrine" that designates the Jews as the Chosen People and all others as no more than animals.⁵²

In contrast to the state narrative encouraging peaceful coexistence between the "children of Abraham," Islamists presented a counter-narrative filled with anti-Jewish conspiracy theories. The most popular combined several blatantly antisemitic arguments suggesting a Jewish-Zionist-American plot to create a new religion called "al-Ibrahimiyya." This new religion would harm Islam, and was the driving force behind the Accords, according to the conspiracy theory. The theory appeared in manifestos, fatwas, articles, books, and conferences, and was voiced by clerics, academics, and columnists from Doha to London. Certain variations were based on fake pamphlets and selective interpretations of the Quran, according to which the Jews are satanic demons, the earthly representatives of evil.

51 Uriya Shavit, "Notes from the Emirates: Tolerance is the New Creed – What Does it Mean?" *Perspectives*, No. 23 (April 2023), <https://cst.tau.ac.il/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/Perspectives-no.-23.pdf>

52 Sa'id al-Tunayji, "Rasa'il fi al-Wa'yi: Al-Bina' al-'Uqadi fi Muwajahat al-Tatbi'" [Messages of Awareness: The Doctrinal Construction Against the Normalization], *Emirati Association Against Normalization*, October 7, 2020, <https://uae4palestine.com/posts/29>

The champions of this conspiracy theory claimed that the Abraham Accords were part of a campaign to paint a false picture of ancient fraternity between the Muslims and Jews. Ultimately, they asserted, this campaign intended to challenge the superiority of Islam over the other Abrahamic religions, replacing it with an “Abrahamic faith” that subsumes all three monotheistic religions.⁵³ Among the proponents of this argument was Ahmad al-Shayba al-Nu’aymi, an Emirati dissident living in London and the chairman of the Emirati Association Against Normalization. In an article he published, entitled “Distorting the Religion for the Sake of Normalization with the Zionists,” he repeated claims previously made by the MB in Egypt and Jordan against the perception of Abraham as the common forefather of Islam and Judaism and against placing Judaism on a par with Islam. Citing Q. 3:67, which states that Abraham was not a Jew but a Muslim *hanif*, as well as Al-Tabari’s (839–923) commentary that Abraham is more the forefather of the Muslims than of the Jews and Christians, Al-Nu’aymi stated that it was a distortion of Islam to associate Abraham with the People of the Book. He stressed that Islam must be seen as the final mission that corrects the errors of the previous religions.⁵⁴

A 2021 manifesto on the so-called “Ibrahimi religion” authored by 32 Islamist organizations stated that following in the ways of the Ibrahimi faith amounts to a repudiation of Islam. The manifesto claimed that the Quran teaches that the Jews’ contempt for Muslims began at the time of Muhammad, that it still exists, and that it will continue. According to the manifesto, one contemporary manifestation of that contempt is the attempt made by modern-day Jews to take over the Arab world by launching a tourism initiative that would ostensibly include Abraham’s life journey. This is in addition to a Jewish plot to return to their native Arab homelands, where they would act as a fifth

53 Muhammad Al-Saghir (@drassagheer), “Bayan ‘Am lil-Umma al-Islamiyya wal-‘Alim bi-Sha’n Muqata‘at al-Muntajat al-Imaratiyya” [Communique to the Islamic Nation and the World on the Boycott of Emirati Products], Twitter, December 20, 2020, <https://twitter.com/drassagheer/status/1340791993023258626?s=03>

54 Ahmad al-Shayba al-Nu’aymi, “Tahrif al-Din lil-Tatbi‘ ma‘a al-Sahayna” [Distortion of Religion for the Sake of Normalization with the Zionists], *Al-Khalij Online*, October 10, 2020, <http://khaleej.online/KMK19R>

column.⁵⁵ Similarly, a statement by the International Union of Muslim Scholars (IUMS), an Islamist organization established in Qatar by Yusuf al-Qaradawi (1926–2022), called upon Muslim scholars to raise fellow Muslims’ awareness of the danger posed by the Ibrahimi religion.⁵⁶

Emirati and Arab officials confronted the Islamist conspiracy theory. The secretary-general of the UAE-based Higher Committee of Human Fraternity, Muhammad ‘Abd al-Salam, flatly denied a conspiracy to create a one-world religion dubbed “the Abrahamic Religion.” On the contrary, the purpose of the efforts to establish Abu Dhabi’s “Abrahamic Family House” was to highlight religious diversity and the distinctive character of each religion, not to diminish religious differences or water down the uniqueness of each faith.⁵⁷ Prof. Jamal al-Suwaydi, the founder of the Emirates Center for Strategic Studies, rejected what he referred to as “ridiculous criticism and false accusations,” which expressed religious fanaticism and contradicted the real essence of Islam’s message.⁵⁸ The former Moroccan ambassador to the UAE, ‘Abd al-Qadir al-Zawi, accused the IUMS of disseminating fake news in order to attack the states that had normalized relations with Israel.⁵⁹

Three years after the signing of the Abraham Accords, the Emirati polemic about the metaphor of Abraham has not yet ended. In February 2023, it heatedly resumed as the official inauguration of the Abrahamic Family House drew near. Emirati president

55 “Bayan al-Hay’at wal-Rawabit al-Islamiyya bi-Sha’n ma Yusamma bil-Din al-Ibrahimi” [Announcement by the Islamic Organization and Association on the So-Called Religion of Abraham], *Rabitat al-‘Ulama’ al-Suriyyin*, February 10, 2021, https://islamsyria.com/site/show_news/1209

56 “Al-Bayan al-Khitami li-Mu’tamar Mawqif al-Umma al-Islamiyya min al-Diyana al-Ibrahimiyya” [Concluding Remarks of the Conference About the Position of the Islamic Nation on the Ibrahimi Religion], *IUMS*, February 22, 2021, <https://iumsonline.org/ar/ContentDetails.aspx?ID=16112>

57 Mohamed Abdelsalam, “The Abrahamic Family House is Not About Merging Faiths,” *The National*, January 22, 2022, <https://www.thenationalnews.com/opinion/comment/2022/01/22/the-abrahamic-family-house-is-not-about-merging-faiths/>

58 Jamal Sanad Al-Suwaydi, “Bayt al-‘Ai’la al-Ibrahimiyya.. Da’wa Imaratiyya lil-Tasamuh” [The Abrahamic Family House: An Emirati Call for Tolerance], *Al-Ittihad*, January 8, 2023, <https://bit.ly/3sIFOLb>

59 ‘Abd al-Qadir al-Zawi, “Al-Diyana al-Ibrahimiyya”: Tahamul wa-Iftira’ fi Bayan ‘Ulama’ [“Ibrahimi Religion”: Prejudice and Slander in a Statement by ‘Ulama’], *al-Majalla*, December 17, 2021, <https://arb.majalla.com/node/185161/>

Muhammad Bin Zayed defined the religious compound as “a platform for constructive dialogue among civilizations and gatherings for peace and human fraternity.”⁶⁰ Echoing the leader’s vision, the Emirati researcher Muhammad al-Dhuhuri wrote in a column for the *Jerusalem Post* that “having three holy houses represent the three Abrahamic religions helps bring people from these three faiths to one place,” and “signals the notion of ‘us,’ not ‘you,’ reflecting the idea of humanity and the right to coexist.” According to the writer, who serves as the head of the strategic studies department at TRENDS Research & Advisory, the project “provides the opportunity for other religions to witness the viability of religions collaborating to achieve peace and stability” and may “open up the way for a common understanding and new approaches to dealing with ongoing international crises.”⁶¹

In contrast, the Emirati Association Against Normalization defined the opening of the Abrahamic Family House as “a dangerous development that threatens the Islamic identity of the Emirates” and “allows Zionists to do whatever they want” in the country.⁶² Other critics claimed that a joint religious compound of worship of this kind not only obscures the distinction between Muslims and infidels, but allows normalization with Israel at the expense of the Palestinians.⁶³ As demonstrated by this ongoing debate, the controversy surrounding the Abrahamic discourse is only one expression of the broader dispute in the Arab and Muslim world regarding the true spirit of Islam and its treatment of others.

60 Mohamed Bin Zayed (@MohamedBinZayed), “The UAE has a Proud History of People from Diverse Communities Working Together to Create New Possibilities...,” Twitter, February 16, 2023, <https://twitter.com/MohamedBinZayed/status/1626260382338760707>

61 Mohamed Aldhuhoori, “The UAE’s Abrahamic Family House is a Shift in Modern History,” *The Jerusalem Post*, February 16, 2023, <https://www.jpost.com/opinion/article-731710>

62 Emirati Association Against Normalization (@uae4palestine2), Twitter, February 18, 2023, <https://twitter.com/uae4palestine2/status/1626823472780394496>

63 “Bin Zayed Yushid bi-Bayt al-‘A’ila al-Ibrahimiyya wa-Intiqadat Wasi’a,” *al-Khalij al-Jadid*, February 17, 2023, <https://bit.ly/3E5dEvi>

Conclusion

While the Abraham Accords were only signed in 2020, the use of Abraham as a metaphor to legitimize peaceful relations between Muslims and Jews has been prevalent in Arab discourse since the beginning of the Arab-Israeli peace process in the late 1970s.

Arab regimes found the metaphor of Abraham useful in legitimizing Judaism as a respected divine religion, legitimizing Jews as partners for peace, and, indirectly, facilitating the recognition of the Jewish state as a legitimate political entity. This metaphor eased the tension between revolutionary peace policies and the traditional ethos that has dominated the Arab world for many decades and preached uncompromising war with the Jewish state. It did so in several ways: (a) by promoting a perception of contemporary Jews as an extension of the traditional Jewish presence in the region rather than as alien invaders; (b) by highlighting the shared values of Jews and Muslims; (c) by endorsing narratives portraying religious coexistence between Muslims and Jews as a natural and desirable situation, in contrast to Islamist and other prevailing perceptions of Jews as eternal historical enemies of the Muslims; and (d) by creating a supportive climate for mutual interaction, i.e., partial or even full normalization, between Arab Muslims and Israeli Jews.⁶⁴

For their part, Islamists challenged the narrative of fraternity between the Abrahamic religions in several ways: (a) by affirming their concept of the nature of Jews as demonic aggressors, usurpers, oppressors, murderers, and violators of treaties who would always remain the historical enemies of Muslims and were inappropriate partners for peace and normalization; (b) by rejecting the perception of Abraham as the common forefather of Islam and Judaism and emphasizing the supremacy of Muhammad and Islam over other prophets and Abrahamic religions, including Judaism; and (c) by spreading conspiracy theories of a Jewish-Zionist-American plot to create a new religion called “al-Ibrahimiyya,” which would subsume all three monotheistic religions and harm Muslims.

The religious polemic between Arab regimes and their Islamist rivals played a significant role in the struggle over the public legitimacy of treaties with Israel. Making

64 For definitions of different types of normalization, see: Elie Podeh, “The Many Faces of Normalization: Models of Arab-Israeli Relations,” *Strategic Assessment*, Vol. 25, No. 1 (2022), pp. 55–78.

use of arguments from Islam, the Egyptian, Jordanian, and Emirati leadership sought to present peace and normalization with the Jewish state as a normative move. In response to the Islamist view, which described peace with Israel as a deviation from the norms and traditions of Islam, the metaphor of Abraham allowed the regimes to place peaceful policies towards Israel within a broader historical-religious context that would transcend the century-long conflict between Zionism and the Arabs. While Islamists described Zionism as an illegitimate imperialist enterprise whose claim over the land of Israel should be rejected, the regimes turned to Abrahamic discourse for an alternative narrative, in which the Jews are an organic part of the region and its past, present, and future. Jordan and the UAE relied more than Egypt on this metaphor, reflecting their initial preference for wider normalization with the Jewish state.

While this article has focused on Egypt, Jordan, and the UAE, the language of “Abrahamic” tolerance between Jews, Christians, and Muslims is being promoted by state agencies in other Arab countries as well. In Morocco, for example, the monarchy purports to uphold a longtime tradition of inter-Abrahamic tolerance that extends to the Moroccan diaspora, namely Moroccan Jews in Israel and beyond. In this framework, all Moroccans, regardless of religious affiliation, are considered integral to a heterogeneous, Abrahamic collective identity unified primarily by allegiance to the king.⁶⁵ Bahrain shares a similar national ethos of harmonious religious coexistence and dialogue between the three Abrahamic faiths.⁶⁶ Such rhetoric has intensified in both kingdoms under the political climate of the Abraham Accords. Consequently, it is imperative that forthcoming studies delve into its specific manifestations and examine them more comprehensively.

Israel is not a passive actor in the regional religious debate. Rather, its policies and discourse resonate in the Arab world. Since the beginning of Arab-Israeli peace negotiations in 1977, several Israeli leaders have mentioned Abraham in their speeches as

65 Sam Millner, Morr Link, and Ofir Winter, “Two Years to Israel-Morocco Normalization: Sustaining the Positive Momentum,” *INSS Insight*, December 26, 2022, <https://www.inss.org.il/publication/morocco-israel/>

66 Houda Nonoo, “Abu Dhabi’s New ‘Abrahamic Family House,’” *The Times of Israel*, February 17, 2023, <https://blogs.timesofisrael.com/abu-dhabis-new-abrahamic-family-house/>; “Bahraini King Positions as Promoter of Interfaith Tolerance,” *World Watch Monitor*, September 21, 2017, <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/2017/09/22602/>

the common forefather of Judaism and Islam.⁶⁷ In the current age of social media, the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs frequently uses Abrahamic discourse on its Arabic-language pages as a tool of religious soft power. The widespread use of such rhetoric by politicians and official state outlets indicates that Israel recognizes the appeal of such discourse among Arab and Muslim audiences as an efficient mechanism to promote coexistence and reconciliation with its neighbors. However, the Abrahamic discourse may gain even greater regional momentum if Israel fully embraces it as a fundamental component of its national ethos and policy priorities, actively fostering its domestic acceptance among Jewish and non-Jewish communities alike.

Finally, the religious fraternity between Israeli Jews and Arab Muslims is interconnected with the political reality on the ground and how it is interpreted by different, at times competing, stakeholders. Violent escalations in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, particularly those that occur in or near Islamic holy places in East Jerusalem, make it harder for Arab and Israeli peace advocates to exhort Muslims and Jews to regard their neighbors as “cousins” and “children of Abraham.” Instead, such events strengthen those who describe the struggle between Islam and Judaism as a “zero-sum game.” Given this complexity, the figure of Abraham is likely to remain a source of inspiration for interfaith relations, but also a matter of dispute and controversy.

About the Author

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67 “Address By Prime Minister Menachem Begin to the Egyptian People,” *Menachem Begin Heritage Center*, November 11, 1977, <https://db.begincenter.org.il/en/article/address-by-prime-minister-menachem-begin-to-the-egyptian-people/>