**Patrilineal Controversy:**

**Abrahamic Discourse as a Justification for Arab-Israeli Normalization**

Ofir Winter

Throughout the Arab-Israeli conflict, Islamist scholars affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood and its offspring have advanced anti-Jewish religious discourse based on selective interpretations of Quranic verses and prophetic traditions. This rhetoric contributed to the development of a negative perception among broad segments of the Arab public of Jews as unacceptable partners for peace and normalization. From the Camp David Accords to the Abraham Accords, as Arab regimes decided to pivot toward signing 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 their 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 a religiously lawful and even desired situation.

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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 it would normalize relations with Israel, it became known as the “Abraham Accords.”

White House staff picked the name as “a last-minute decision,”[[1]](#footnote-2) not President Trump himself, and did so perhaps even against his initial preferences. Called upon by the president to clarify the name of the accord, David Friedman, then-US Ambassador to Israel, said that Abraham is the father of three monotheistic faiths—Christianity, Islam, and Judaism—and no figure better symbolizes the potential for unity among these three great faiths. In response, perhaps jokingly, the president remarked that he wanted to name the agreement “the Donald J. Trump Accord” but had refrained, believing the press would not view it favorably.[[2]](#footnote-3)

Ambassador Friedman, who was extensively engaged in the behind-the-scenes formulation of the Abraham Accords, described in his autobiography with great emotion 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 to 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]](#footnote-4)

Yusuf al-ʿUtayba, the UAE Ambassador to Washington, also assessed that the parties could not have come up with a better name.[[4]](#footnote-5) 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 and fully Integrated into the Middle East’s political discourse. Even the Biden Administration ultimately decided to adopt its predecessor’s terminology after some doubt it would do so.[[5]](#footnote-6)

As discussed in this article, the role of Abraham as a metaphor for Arab-Israeli and Muslim-Jewish rapprochement predates the Abraham Accords. Previous peacemakers used it throughout history. In the context of peace agreements between Arab countries and Israel, it 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 pillar in King Hussein Bin Talal’s speeches in favor of the Jordanian-Israeli normalization; and it was finally institutionalized in the early 2020s as the official name of the normalization agreements that were concluded, with the support of the American administration, between Israel and four Arab countries – the UAE, Bahrain, Morocco, and Sudan. This paper focuses on the UAE, which had emerged as a regional leader in Abrahamic discourse years before its direct engagement with the Abraham Accords, as a part of its broader agenda promoting religious tolerance.

The figure of Abraham, and religious rhetoric, more generally, were frequently used in the polemic regarding peace with Israel. This reflected the supremacy of Islam in contemporary Muslim societies and its central role in legitimizing Arab regimes and in swaying public opinion in favor of their policies. The metaphor of Abraham was beneficial for Arab regimes in several respects. First, it provided an Islamic imprimatur for peace and various models of formalized normalization relations with Israel, ranging from partial to full normalization,[[6]](#footnote-7) and improved their reception among the public. Second, it eased the tension between revolutionary peace policies and the traditional ethos that had dominated the Arab world for many decades, which—on religious and other grounds—preached uncompromising war with Israel and rejected any peaceful settlement with the Jewish state. Third, it challenged prevailing Islamist and other perceptions of Jews as historical enemies by employing alternative narratives of religious coexistence.

The use of the metaphor of Abraham in Arab polemics over peace agreements with Israel has received relatively little attention in academic literature: Shimon Shamir discussed the terminology used by King Hussein of Jordan to glorify the shared Abrahamic heritage of Muslims and Jews,[[7]](#footnote-8) and I addressed the issue on the margins of the broader Arab discussion on the legitimacy of peace and normalization agreements with Israel.[[8]](#footnote-9) Several studies provided different readings of Jewish, Christian, and Islamic myths and traditions concerning the Abrahamic family metaphor[[9]](#footnote-10); other studies examined the potential that the figure of Abraham embodies for interreligious dialogue between Jews, Christians, and Muslims.[[10]](#footnote-11)

By focusing on points of transition from conflict to peace between Israel and the first three Arab countries that made peace with it – Egypt, Jordan, and the UAE – this study 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, and takes a comparative analytical approach to offer a broader view of the function of “Abraham” in Arab-Israeli conflict resolution and peacebuilding processes.

**Islam and the Jews: A Brief Overview**

Since the emergence of Islam in the 7th century, Muslim perspectives towards Jews have exhibited a predominantly ambivalent 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 can 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 changing religious observances borrowed from Jewish tradition, including changing the direction of prayer from Jerusalem to the Kaʿba in Mecca. In addition, while the earlier 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, but most Islamic commentators held that it was Ishmael rather than Isaac.[[11]](#footnote-12)

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, 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 can serve as a basis for either hostility or rapprochement. The perception of Muslims and Jews as “the sons of Abraham” encapsulates ancient conflicts but 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. Instead of historic rivals, Jews and Muslims can see themselves as the descendants of a single forefather: “cousins” who quarreled and grew estranged but can reconcile and restore their fraternal relations, as is natural and desirable.[[12]](#footnote-13)

In addition to Islamic theological codes and religious traditions, Muslim dual attitudes towards Jews were shaped by various factors, including political, cultural, and socio-economic aspects. These factors 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. Periodically, Jews in different parts of the Muslim world faced persecution, violence, deportation, or coerced conversion to Islam. Simultaneously, 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 communities in Muslim lands experienced comparatively better treatment than their counterparts in Christian Europe, benefiting from greater security and attaining a 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.

The advent of the Jewish-Zionist national movement in Palestine during the late nineteenth century gradually influenced the perspectives of Muslim states and many Muslims toward Jews. A significant number of Muslims, particularly Arabs, began perceiving Zionism as an extension of Western colonialism and associated Jews with the foreign influence they sought liberation from. 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 expanded following the November 29, 1947, United Nations Partition Plan for Palestine, and further intensified following the wars of 1948 and 1967, and the subsequent Israeli occupation of allegedly Arab and Muslim territories, notably the Islamic shrines in East Jerusalem. Nevertheless, in addition to Muslim solidarity with the Palestinian cause, a notable segment 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]](#footnote-14)

Religious clerics and scholars are the primary agents who shape the public’s religious perceptions, among other things, regarding 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 foreign, conform to the tenets of Islam, as well as for the right to define the corpus of canonical texts and their valid interpretations.[[14]](#footnote-15)

While most of the political actors in Arab countries regard themselves as believing Muslims, the religious establishments, funded and supervised by the state, promote Islamic interpretations aimed at providing religious approval for the existing political order and for the decisions of the leaders, which, by definition, are subject to pragmatic constraints.[[15]](#footnote-16) On the other hand, Islamists are characterized by the call to reinstate Islam as the exclusive reference for all aspects of life and consider political activism as the primary means to promote 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 pragmatic policies of Arab regimes.[[16]](#footnote-17)

Since the foundation of the MB in 1928 to the present, Islamists have refused to recognize the Jewish state and 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 this nation’s anticipated re-establishment; (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 ʿayn*) 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.

Another dominant Islamist argument, which is the focus of this essay, claims that Jews are unacceptable partners for peace because, based on carefully selected Quranic verses and prophetic traditions, they have been historical enemies of Muslims since the time of the Prophet, violators of contracts, and a people possessing inherent negative characteristics, including malice, greediness, and treachery.[[17]](#footnote-18) Such demonization of the Jews was prevalent in Islamist discourse in Egypt, Jordan, and the UAE, and was contested by the regimes that made peace with Israel and their affiliated religious establishments.

**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 also the first which had to manufacture broad public legitimacy for such groundbreaking policies in the face of Islamist and other objections. Leaders of both countries had to remain loyal to predominate beliefs and values in their countries to win broad popular support; they resorted to Abrahamic discourse to provide Islamic-religious sanction to their political moves.

The use of the metaphor of Abraham in the context of the Egyptian-Israeli peace settlement was sporadic and unsystematic, but it was nevertheless present. Its powerful potential to strike a conciliatory tone was first exemplified already in Anwar Sadat’s historic address at the Knesset on November 20, 1977, where 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 peace” (Zechariah 8:19) and quoted a Quranic verse (3:84), which 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]](#footnote-19)

In some of his public statements, Sadat called Jews and Muslims “cousins.”[[19]](#footnote-20) According to his wife Jehan, these were not empty words; Sadat’s desire for peace with Israel was borne from something more profound than pragmatism alone. 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]](#footnote-21) During the peace talks, Sadat proposed establishing 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 and serve as a symbol of peace and brotherhood among the Abrahamic religions.[[21]](#footnote-22)

In an official ruling issued after the signing of the peace treaty with Israel, Egyptian Mufti Jad al-Haqq ʿAli Jad al-Haqq argued that Islam’s general messages of peace were valid also 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. Not only did this discourse challenge the Islamist conception of Jews as the eternal, historical enemies of Islam, but it also implicitly suggested peace was valid with the Jewish state.[[22]](#footnote-23)

Considering 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]](#footnote-24) the movement’s opposition to his Jerusalem visit was initially restrained. Nevertheless, *Al-Daʿwa*, the MB’s mouthpiece, stressed the Jewish enemy’s demonic nature and what this entails regarding the religious, historical, and eternal character of the conflict with Israel.[[24]](#footnote-25)

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. ʿUmar 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]](#footnote-26) Following the peace agreement’s signing on March 26, 1979, *Al-Daʿwa* published an article by the Islamic scholar ʿAbd al-Halim ʿAwis (1943–2011) titled *The Jews’ Nature Prevents Them from Living in Peace with Others*. In the article, ʿAwis detailed his impressions about the Jews based on Adolph Hitler’s *Mein Kampf* and the Quran, “which preceded [Hitler] by 1,400 years.”[[26]](#footnote-27)

The MB also criticized Sadat’s initiative to establish a religious complex for the Abrahamic faiths based on religious arguments. Muhammad ʿAbd 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 placed on the same level as Islam and a mosque (e.g., Q. 4:171).[[27]](#footnote-28) In any case, Sadat was assassinated in October 1981 before he could fulfill this vision.

In October 1994, about fifteen years after the first Arab-Israeli peace agreement, Jordan and Israel signed the second one. 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 championed the metaphor of Abraham, implying that peace between Jordan and Israel revived the ancient blood ties between two brothers, sons of a single forefather.[[28]](#footnote-29)

Extensively referencing the mythos of Abraham reflected Jordan’s and Egypt’s different concepts of the nature of peace with Israel. Whereas Egypt felt from the early stages more comfortable with a limited “cold peace,” King Hussein initially believed that to reap the fruits of peace and translate normalization into concrete economic benefits, fostering “warm” people-to-people relations was essential. To this end, he advanced the narrative that peace with the Jews is a renewal of the fraternity between two religions that were born in the same geographical area, share common roots and a similar religious-cultural heritage, and have a long history of friendly relations, which should be restored.[[29]](#footnote-30)

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 ʿAbdullah’s dream to forge peace between the children of Abraham[[30]](#footnote-31) and claimed that the shared roots of the two “sons” called for person-to-person connections between their countries.[[31]](#footnote-32) At the signing ceremony for the peace treaty on October 26, 1994, the king prophesied that all 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]](#footnote-33) Concerning Jerusalem, King Hussein expressed his wish for the holy sites to be above exclusive Palestinian or Israeli national sovereignty, and to serve as a symbol of peace among the children of Abraham.[[33]](#footnote-34)

The king’s friendly relations with Israeli prime minister Yitzhak Rabin, who had been Israel’s Defense Forces (IDF) chief-of-staff and defeated Jordan during the 1967 war, served as 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 with the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) after addressing 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 supporters and his Islamist rivals alike, saying: “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.”[[34]](#footnote-35)

The Jordanian MB, for its part, was outraged by the king’s use of the phrase “children of Abraham” to refer to the Jews. Yusuf al-ʿAzm (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.”[[35]](#footnote-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!”[[36]](#footnote-37)

In both Egypt and Jordan, there was a heated polemic between the regime and its Islamist rivals regarding the question of relations between Muslims and Jews. While both Sadat and Hussein resorted to the figure of Abraham as a metaphor for fraternity with the Jews, the more intense usage in Jordan 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 the attempts to legitimize normal friendly relations with the Jews in preparation for rapprochement with the Jewish state.

**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.[[37]](#footnote-38) In a bid to present an ideological alternative to Islamic radicals, it has worked since the beginning of the 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 just 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, and 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 to promote its anti-radical religious agenda at home and abroad.[[38]](#footnote-39)

Emphasis has been placed on activities fostering 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 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, and such policies, in fact, are criticized by Islamist currents.[[39]](#footnote-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 ethos of interreligious dialogue in reality, 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 official Jewish synagogue to be opened in the UAE, since 2018, public Jewish communal life has gradually developed in the country.[[40]](#footnote-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.[[41]](#footnote-42) Clerics affiliated with the regime defended these measures, saying that they promote coexistence among the faiths and reject binary perceptions of “believers” versus “unbelievers.”[[42]](#footnote-43)

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 by Emirati public opinion. Hence, the September 2020 Abraham Accords were introduced from the outset as a bridge between countries as well as divine religions. Their official announcement already 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.”[[43]](#footnote-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, in Article 6, the sides committed to “undertake to foster mutual understanding, respect, coexistence and a culture of peace between their societies in the spirit of their common ancestor, Abraham.”[[44]](#footnote-45) ʿAbdullah bin Zayed Al Nahyan, the Emirati foreign minister, supported the reference to the figure of Abraham in the agreement, which reflects that both the Arab-Israeli conflict and its solution are being rightly treated in the framework of history, religion, and culture.[[45]](#footnote-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 since they are fellow descendants of Abraham. Sheikh ʿAbdullah bin Bayyah, acting in his capacity as head of the UAE Fatwa Council and the Abu Dhabi Forum for Peace (*Muntada Taʿziz al-Silm fil-Mujtamaʿat 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 to the Abrahamic ones.[[46]](#footnote-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.[[47]](#footnote-48) ʿAbdallah al-Sayyid Walad Abahu, a Mauritanian scholar and a columnist for the Emirati daily *al-Ittihad*, claimed that both the Bible, the New Testament, and the Quran, cherish the protection of basic human rights.[[48]](#footnote-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: (a) it replaced the prevailing Holocaust denial in Arab discourse with a recognition of the tragedy experienced by the Jews during the Second World War; (b) it advanced empathy and sympathy towards the Jewish “other,” instead of the common approach of “competitive victimhood” between Israelis and Palestinians; and (c) it offered Emirati Muslims an innovative space for humane engagement with the most painful chapter in Jewish history, based on facts and evidence.

The exhibition tells the story of Nazi Germany’s persecution of Jews from Kristallnacht to the implementation of the Final Solution, photos and exhibits honoring the memory of Anne Frank and the 1.5 million Jewish children murdered in the Holocaust, and 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 its Muslim community. It also narrates the heroic story of Muhammad Hilmi, an Egyptian doctor residing in Berlin who saved several Jewish lives, and became in 2013 the first Arab to be declared by Yad Vashem “Righteous Among the Nations.” The main message that emerges from the exhibition expresses 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 cherished 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 in the background of the sunset and the skyscrapers of Dubai and Tel Aviv. As a symbol of their shared heritage as descendants of Abraham, above them, the word “cousins” in Arabic and Hebrew appears.[[49]](#footnote-50) In its first two years of existence, some 6,000 people have visited the Holocaust memorial exhibition. According to the museum’s founder Ahmad ʿUbayd al-Mansuri, who served as an Emirati parliament member from 2011 to 2015, Arab visitors, who were around half of those who visited, were primarily schoolchildren.[[50]](#footnote-51)

Emirati Islamists, on their part, criticized the state’s political and religious Abrahamic discourse by claiming that the Jews are the historical enemies of Muslims and, therefore, cannot be regarded as legitimate partners for peaceful normal relations with Muslims. Exiled Emirati dissident Saʿid 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 them and modern Israel, which, he claimed, reflect their “barbaric doctrine” that designates the Jews as the Chosen People and all others as no more than animals.[[51]](#footnote-52)

Compared to the state narrative encouraging peaceful coexistence between the “Children of Abraham,” Islamists presented a counter-narrative filled with 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. It 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.

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 and, moreover, to challenge the superiority of Islam over the other Abrahamic religions and replace it with an “Abrahamic faith” that subsumes all three monotheistic religions.[[52]](#footnote-53) Among the proponents of this argument was Ahmad al-Shayba al-Nuʿaymi, an Emirati dissident living in London and the chairman of the Emirati Association Against Normalization. In an article he published, titled “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 commentary that Abraham is the forefather of the Muslims more than of the Jews and Christians, Al-Nuʿaymi stated that associating Abraham with the People of the Book is a distortion of Islam. He stressed that Islam must be seen as the final mission that corrects the errors of the previous religions.[[53]](#footnote-54)

A manifesto authored by thirty-two Islamist organizations and published in February 2021 regarding the so-called “Ibrahimi religion” stated that following 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 be a fifth column (Rabitat al-ʿUlamaʾ al-Suriyyin 2021).[[54]](#footnote-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 the awareness of Muslims to the danger posed by the Ibrahimi religion.[[55]](#footnote-56)

Emirati and Arab officials confronted the Islamist conspiracy theory. The secretary-general of the UAE-based Higher Committee of Human Fraternity, Muhammad ʿAbd al-Salam, denied a conspiracy to create a one-world religion dubbed “the Abrahamic Religion.” On the contrary, the purpose of efforts to establish Abu Dhabi’s “Abrahamic Family House” was to highlight religious diversity and the distinctive character of each religion and not to diminish religious differences or water down the uniqueness of every single faith.[[56]](#footnote-57) Prof. Jamal al-Suwaydi, the founder of the Emirates Center for Strategic Studies, rejected the “ridiculous criticism and false accusations” which express religious fanaticism and contradict the real essence of the message of Islam.[[57]](#footnote-58) The former Moroccan ambassador to the UAE, ʿAbd al-Qadir al-Zawi, accused the IUMS of disseminating fake news in order to attack the states that normalized relations with Israel.[[58]](#footnote-59)

Almost three years after the signing of the Abraham Accords, the polemic in the UAE about the metaphor of Abraham has not ended yet; it heatedly resumed once again in February 2023 as the official inauguration of the Abrahamic Family House neared. Emirati president, Muhammad Bin Zayed, defined the religious compound as “a platform for constructive dialogue among civilizations and gatherings for peace and human fraternity.”[[59]](#footnote-60) Echoing the leader’s view, 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, 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.”[[60]](#footnote-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.[[61]](#footnote-62) Other critics claimed that a joint religious compound of worship of this kind obscures the distinction between Muslims and infidels, and allows normalization with Israel at the expense of the Palestinians.[[62]](#footnote-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.

**Conclusion**

Whereas the Abraham Accords were 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-Israel 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. It did so in several ways: (a) by promoting the 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 coexistence between Muslims and Jews as a natural and desirable situation, in contrast to the Islamist perception of Jews as eternal enemies of Muslims; and (d) by creating a supportive climate for mutual interactions, i.e., partial or even full normalization, between Arab Muslims and Israeli Jews.

Islamists, on their part, challenged the narrative of fraternity between the Abrahamic religions in several ways: (a) by ratifying their concept regarding the demonic nature of Jews as aggressors, usurpers, oppressors, murderers, and violators of treaties who will always remain the historical enemies of Muslims and will be considered 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 that suggested 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 the treaties with Israel. Utilizing Islamic arguments, 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, one that transcends 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 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 confession, are considered an integral part of a heterogeneous, Abrahamic collective identity that is unified primarily by allegiance to the King.[[63]](#footnote-64) Bahrain shares a similar national ethos of harmonious religious coexistence and dialogue between the three Abrahamic faiths.[[64]](#footnote-65) Such rhetoric has been intensifying in both kingdoms under the political climate of the Abraham Accords. Consequently, it becomes imperative to delve into its specific manifestations and examine them more comprehensively in forthcoming studies.

Israel is not a passive actor in the regional religious debate. 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 the common forefather of Judaism and Islam.[[65]](#footnote-66) In the current age of social media, the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs frequently uses Abrahamic discourse on its pages in Arabic as a tool of religious soft power. The widespread use of such rhetoric by politicians and official state outlets indicates that Israel highly 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 can gain even greater regional momentum if Israel wholeheartedly embraces it as a fundamental component of its national culture of peace, and actively fosters 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 preach to 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 between Muslim commentators representing competing political camps.

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