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The Abraham Accords

A Comparative Perspective on American Foreign Policy in the Middle East.

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Abstract

This Master's thesis explores the Abraham Accords and the Iran nuclear deal in order to compare former Presidents Trump and Obama on their approaches to multilateralism in security cooperation in the Middle East. This relates to their efforts in resolving conflicts and attempts at stabilising the region and will look at the specific impacts of the two deals, as well as detail how and why the deals were realised, looking into both domestic and international factors. The thesis aims to do this mainly from the theoretical foundation of offensive and defensive realism, as well as some key insights gleaned from the perspectives on the two-level game theory, neoclassical realism, the 'Hub-and-Spoke' approach, and the Revisionist vs. the Status-quo alignments in the Middle East. A qualitative literature review was used as the methodological basis for gathering, interpreting, and synthesising the information presented in this research project.

The two presidents both approached security situations in the Middle East multilaterally, but in different ways. Obama's nuclear deal was a classic multilateral agreement involving international institutions cooperating towards a single goal, whereas Trump's Abraham Accords saw the US negotiating from a central position, trying to forge stronger bilateral ties between Israel and four Arab states. The thesis finds that the geopolitical changes in the Middle East, specifically uncertainties in the Gulf states about continued American involvement in the region, combined with the nature of President Trump's transactional style of negotiation and zero-sum foreign policy ideology, was among the main factors as to why the Abraham Accords came to fruition. The Abraham Accords impacted the region in many ways and will continue to do so in the foreseeable future. Among the most important impacts is the economic and security dimensions, which holds vast potential for future peaceful development in the region.

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1.0 Introduction

It is not controversial to claim that the Middle East is one of the most troubled regions of the world in terms of war and conflict. The region has for a long time been characterised by religious conflict, civil wars, and proxy wars, with the most prominent of these in recent times being the everlasting Israel vs. Palestine conflict, the civil war in Syria and the Iran vs. Saudi Arabia proxy war reflecting the sectarian divide in the Muslim world. The Middle East has generated a plethora of interesting cases to study in relevance to international relations theory. Recently, one of the most exciting developments for regional peacebuilding and security cooperation is the creation of the Abraham Accords in late 2020.

Multilateralism has been the *modus operandi* when dealing with issues in the Middle East for a long time, the likes of the 1991 Madrid peace conference that launched a multilateral process to deal with conflicts between Israelis and Arabs, and the conferences in Amman, Cairo, Casablanca, and Doha that saw Israeli, Arab, and American international officials and business leaders come together and talk about economic challenges facing the region, is another such example. Although both these processes saw modest results, there was great significance to them happening at all (Kurtzer & Miller, 2020). Obama's Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) was clearly a multilateral agreement, involving Iran, the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) and the European Union (EU). Although not as clear, the Abraham Accords can be seen as Trump's attempt at multilateralism in American foreign policy and security cooperation, as they involved the US as a focal point, Israel, and four Arab states in normalisation agreements (Samore et al., 2015; Singer, 2021).

The common view of the Abraham Accords is one of peace treaties between Israel and four Arab states, but: "Despite the narrative of 'peace' around the Abraham Accords, it is not to be forgotten that the harbinger of this Accord is 'deterrence' – both political and military – against Iran." (Taneja, 2020). This clearly shows the intentions behind the Accords, their main purpose. Although surface level analysis suggests they are simple normalisation agreements, the Accords are unequivocally meant to curb Iranian aggression in the region, especially against Israel and the Sunni Gulf states, as will be illustrated in the coming chapters.

1.1 Background

This section will quickly talk about my motivations for undertaking this research project and present some previous literature and research that has been conducted on Obama and Trump's foreign policies.

Having written my bachelor's thesis on the war in Iraq and the successes and failures of counterinsurgency campaigns under Bush and Obama, I thought it would be interesting to take on a project that has a more contemporary focus on American foreign policy and the Middle East. At the start of this project, I considered many different topics of research, some of which had theoretical links to my bachelor's thesis, such as war to peace transitions, leadership- and competence in policymaking during warfare, consequences of policy-mistakes in war, and institutional- and organisational challenges. Other topics that were considered, but not related to my previous project, were research projects such as the surge of populism and cleavage politics in Europe, the rise of China, the coronavirus and its impact on trade relations, and consequences of domestic lockdown policies during the pandemic.

Foregoing all of that, this Master's thesis will focus on American foreign policy, comparing Trump's transaction-based and often unilateral foreign policy approach to the diplomatic, internationalist, and more multilateral doctrine of Obama (Cohen, 2019; Goldberg, 2016; Joffe, 2018; Rohde, 2012). This thesis analyses the Accords in a comparative perspective by first studying Obama's nuclear deal with Iran, both of which will be introduced in greater detail in the discussion and analysis chapter. The focus is on the impacts of both deals, in terms of economy, diplomacy, and security. Their contrasting achievements and failures will be used to compare the two president's approaches to multilateral agreements in foreign policy.

American foreign policy and the conflicts in the Middle East are two topics which are often intertwined and interconnected. As I have been interested in both topics for a long time, I thought combining the two into a research project could be very interesting and possibly yield some beneficial insight and generate understanding about a topic that has not been studied to a great degree, mainly the impact of the recent Abraham Accords, but also the comparisons of Trump and Obama and their different multilateral approaches to security cooperation and problem-solving in the Middle East.

Due to the sharp political divide between left and right in the American political system, and the polarisation that exists in society as a result, it is not surprising to find many contrasting

reflections on the policy achievements and failures of both presidents, finding both glowing praise and harsh criticism.

This was not unexpected in any way when I set out to begin researching this topic, however some surprises were had initially, as I did not expect to find much positive information about Trump and his foreign policy. Most surprisingly to me is the fact that some scholars of international relations, and contributors to foreign policy journals, acknowledge that Trump may have done some things right in his unorthodox approach (see Kroenig, 2017; R. Schweller, 2018).

1.2 Research Questions

What does the contrast between the Abraham Accords and the Iran nuclear deal reveal about the differences in approach to multilateralism in security cooperation, which factors enabled the creation of the Accords, and what is their impact on the Middle East?

This is a three-part question and will therefore be answered in three separate sections before being combined at the end of the thesis for a succinct conclusion. The first part of the question will be answered by looking at both presidents foreign policy in general, as well as specifically in regard to the Middle East, and what their deals accomplished, as well as what they did not accomplish, detailing criticism and praise of both. The second part of the question will delve into the creation of the Abraham Accords and will look into some factors that enabled their realisation, taking both domestic and international factors into consideration. The last part looks at the regional impact of the Abraham Accords and what it means for diplomatic relations, economic benefit, and security cooperation in the region, as well as future implications for the existing political landscape in the Middle East, the impacts of the JCPOA will also be discussed, particularly regarding Iran. To answer this main research question, I will employ some guiding questions that will help structure this thesis in a productive manner and grant the reader some immediate clarity as to what it will entail.

The two deals are examples of different approaches to multilateralism in American foreign policy, what are the goals and participants of each, what are some domestic factors to consider in the creation of the two deals, and are there any differences in regional security cooperation based on the two deals?

Comparing the two deals will be crucial to the analysis, seeing as both deals ultimately were attempts at dealing with Iranian aggression multilaterally, in an effort to deter them from expanding their sphere of influence and curb their aggressive behaviour. In answering this question, I will be exploring Obamas nuclear deal with Iran, detailing its participants, the main objectives, policy instruments, and goals, as well as the many arguments for and against it, then contrasting that with the Abraham Accords and its participants, goals, and expectations, and some criticism and praise, before looking at domestic reasons that can contextualise the international factors, as well as detailing any changes in security cooperation in the region based on the deals.

What are some factors that can explain why some Arab states have committed to normalise their relations with Israel, which incentives were provided by the US in the Accords, and are they a step in the right direction to releasing some tension in the region?

This will be answered by looking at some regional developments that lead to today's political regional climate where normalisation with Israel was possible, there will also be a thorough detail of all the countries in the Abraham Accords, why they decided to commit to a normalisation agreement, and what they received in return from the US for doing so. In relation to the last part of the question I will be illustrating where it can fall short, detailing potential risks.

What do the Accords mean for the major players in the Middle East, as in Israel and powerful Arab states, such as Saudi-Arabia and Iran, what is the current course of action under the Biden administration and what does the future of the Middle Eastern political landscape look like?

Answering this question will be a detailed explanation of how the Abraham Accords impact the Middle East, as well as what it means for the Revisionist vs. Status quo alignments, and for the major players in the region, mostly in terms of economic impact, but also some implications for diplomatic relations and security cooperation. Near the end I will also discuss what the Biden administration is doing about the Accords and mention some positive outcomes and expectations for the future, also presenting the most exciting candidate to enter the Accords, in Saudi Arabia, and what would be required to make them join.

1.3 Clarifying Terms

The research questions bring up two of the most central terms in this thesis, in multilateralism and normalisation. The term normalisation especially and the terms often accompanying it like recognition, diplomatic relations and diplomacy all have separate meanings, so a clear definition and explanation of these terms and how they relate to my thesis is crucial and will provide the reader with key context and establish a solid foundation for greater understanding of the materials presented in the coming chapters.

1.3.1 Multilateralism

The term multilateralism is thrown around a lot in today's political discourse, and in international relations literature it has been used to label a variety of activities in the international system (Keohane, 1990). Although one can intuitively understand what the term refers to, it is useful to explain what it is by providing a concise definition and detail how it pertains to the theoretical foundation for this thesis. "Multilateralism can be defined as the practice of co-ordinating national policies in groups of three or more states, through ad hoc arrangements or by means of institutions." (Keohane, 1990, p. 731). This definition limits the theoretical understanding of multilateralism to interactions between states, which is what this thesis will mainly focus on, the way Obama and Trump approached multilateralism in their foreign policy relating to security cooperation in the Middle East.

Multilateralism implicitly requires states to adhere to international norms and cooperate with international institutions, whereas by contrast, unilateralism depicts a situation where a single country can influence international outcomes by itself. Unilateral and bilateral foreign policy usually refer to how a powerful country can dictate international relations by basically ignoring international institutions and norms (Tago, 2017). We can clearly see this exemplified in the Abraham Accords and the JCPOA, Obama's approach to multilateralism in the JCPOA was to cooperate with the UNSC, trying to spread power evenly among participants of the deal, whereas Trump's approach to multilateralism in the Abraham Accords were more of a 'hub-and-spoke' approach, which is to say that the countries in the Accords were not directly connected, but through the American hub. This latter approach will be thoroughly discussed in the coming chapter.

1.3.2 Recognition, Diplomatic Relations, Diplomacy, and Normalisation

In much of the literature that surrounds the Abraham Accords and the peacebuilding processes in the Middle East, particularly with the Arab-Israeli conflict, terms like "diplomacy", "diplomatic relations", "recognition", and "normalisation" is used synonymously, but each term has specific meanings, and distinguishing between them is necessary (Sorkin, 2021).

Recognition is a unilateral act and is viewed theoretically as a pre-requisite for the establishment of diplomatic relations. In cases where one state unilaterally recognises another, it formally acknowledges the other state's sovereignty. Practically, the establishment of diplomatic relations and recognition is often merged into a single action, following up recognition with quickly establishing diplomatic relations and combining the two actions into a single declaration. Sometimes states also establish diplomatic relations with another state and let that signify an implicit recognition of their sovereign statehood (James, 2016).

Diplomatic relations and recognition are clearly not the same thing, as withered diplomatic relations for instance, are not seen as a retraction of recognition. Diplomacy is viewed in the literature as the pre-condition for unhindered diplomacy: "[...] the handle which opens the door to the establishment of embassies, both resident and non-resident, to the easy despatch of special missions, and hence to all the activity in which diplomats commonly engage." (James, 2016, p. 257). This distinguishes the term diplomacy from diplomatic relations, as diplomacy is thought of as the structures and agreements that allow states to have relations through their respective diplomatic representatives (James, 2016).

There are many different kinds of approaches to diplomacy in the literature, but most relevant for this thesis is "Track One" and "Track two" diplomacy. Track one diplomacy is a foreign policy tool developed to improve relations among states, that establishes and develops contacts between governments through mutually recognised intermediaries (Mapendere, 2006). The most important feature of this type of diplomacy is the formal application at the state-level, it is usually considered as the chief peacebuilding tool in a state's foreign policy toolkit, and is conducted by diplomats, high-ranking government officials and national leaders (Mapendere, 2006).

Track two diplomacy is the unofficial and informal interaction of members in adversary groups or nations that aim to influence public opinion and organise resources in a way that might help resolve their conflict. Coined by Joseph Montville, track two diplomacy is used to describe diplomatic activity that takes place outside of official government channels. It is not viewed as

a substitute for track one diplomacy, but as a complementary tool that compensates for some of the constraints that national leaders have to deal with, like the expectations of their constituency (Kaye, 2001; Mapendere, 2006). For the last three decades, former adversaries in the Middle East have been engaging in track two diplomacy, in the form of unofficial multilateral dialogue about security issues, some of which sponsored by governments and others by private actors like universities, research institutes and NGO's (Kaye, 2001). This type of diplomacy is fairly common in the Middle East, and security-related track two talks are a mainstay in the region (Kaye, 2007). What the Abraham Accords brings with it then, is the potential for real track one diplomacy between Israel and the four signatories of the Accords, as recognition and diplomatic relations are established, with normalisation processes underway.

In the field of conflict resolution, the term normalisation has usually been used to describe one step in a sequential peace process between two parties, but from a western perspective this term is problematic, as it does not take into account the political, social, and cultural realities of the Arab-Israeli conflict. The Arab-Israeli conflict has been said to be intractable, and that it is deeply embedded into the socio-political-cultural identities, it is characterised both by violence and complexity, involving many different actors, with leaders sometimes viewing the conflict from a zero-sum perspective with the cost of getting out seeming higher than staying in (Hitman & Kertcher, 2018).

Rejecting this zero-sum view of all-or-nothing in conflict resolution, the term normalisation refers to an active practice between different Arab actors and Israel, and can take the form of political, security, economic, and cultural cooperation for the short or the long term : “[...] normalization is a strategy that focuses on structural issues that aim to improve the relations between the actors through an establishment of diplomatic relations, cooperation on economic issues, security arrangements and other affairs.” (Hitman & Kertcher, 2018, p. 50). This definition sees the establishment of diplomatic relations as just one part of a normalisation process, and this distinction highlights the shortcomings with peace treaties of the past, in Egypt and Jordan. Whereas they did break the taboo of signing peace treaties with Israel to end their wars, they did not include the normalisation process of free movement of goods and people between states as promised, reflecting a “cold peace”. The Abraham Accords in contrast has normalisation as their core tenet, with the main ambition of fostering a “warm peace” between Arab states and Israel for the first time (Inbar, 2020).

1.4 Scope of the Project

It was after a meeting with my supervisor that I decided to focus my thesis on Trump's Abraham Accords, on their creation as well as their impact and influence on the Middle Eastern political landscape compared to the Obama era. My thoughts are to investigate the Abraham Accords, comparing them with Obama's nuclear deal with Iran and from there identify differences in approach to multilateralism in international agreements and security cooperation in the Middle East. Comparing and contrasting the Abraham Accords with the Iran nuclear deal will be crucial to highlight the differences and similarities between the two presidents, and their respective efforts when it comes to peacebuilding in the region.

As a topic, American foreign policy in the Middle East does carry with it some potential pitfalls for this thesis, most notably getting too bogged down in historical developments and religious conflicts. This thesis will not explore history and religion to any major degree. The focus is specifically on foreign policy, the Abraham Accords and the Iran nuclear deal, as well as the impacts that these deals have had on the power dynamics and politics in the region, specifically in relation to the conflicts between Saudi Arabia and Iran, as well as the Israel-Palestine conflict, and the revisionist vs. status-quo alignments in the Middle East, which will be explained further in the theory chapter.

Looking into the Trump administration's efforts to elevate the international standing of Israel in the eyes of other Arab states will be very interesting. I will be investigating the effects of the Accords, finding out if they are simply economic normalisations or if they could serve to induce a more peaceful coexistence between Israel and their neighbors. Increased economic, diplomatic, and security cooperation between Israel and Arab countries could mean the beginning of a more peaceful region, with more Arab states predicted to join the Accords in the coming years. "To at least some extent, the Accords have already freed the region from the rhetoric that has only encouraged stagnation and are pushing regional actors toward positive action." (Alter & Janardhan, 2021). It is however noteworthy that these deals did very little in the face of the recent (May 2021) Gaza protests as the Accords don't focus on resolving the Palestinian conundrum, rather trying to better Israeli relations with states that were never directly at war with them, but that definitely had strained relationships.

1.5 Thesis Structure

The thesis consists of five chapters: Introduction, theory, methodology, analysis- and discussion, and a summary and conclusion. The introductory chapter starts with a quick general introduction to the theme and the two deals. It presents the background for the thesis, and my motivations for taking on this research project, it also outlines the research questions and defines some key terms, as well as present some important information about the foreign policy doctrines of Presidents Obama and Trump. The theory chapter begins with a short section on why theory is a useful analytical tool, before introducing some secondary theories about international relations and foreign policy, then jumping into the main theoretical perspectives that I have chosen to employ as a foundation for the discussion and analysis. The methodology chapter outlines the research process, detailing which methods I have chosen to utilise and how I went about finding information and researching the relevant topics, how I related to the validity and reliability of the thesis, as well as some quick preliminary findings.

The analysis and discussion chapter tackles the main topics of this thesis, going through the two presidents' general foreign policies, their thoughts about the international system and power politics, and their international deals, comparing the two. It also highlights the reasons why some Arab states have now decided to establish diplomatic relations, recognise, and commit to a normalisation process with Israel, before looking at the impact that the Abraham Accords have had on the Middle East, some potential risks, positive outcomes, and expectations for the future.

1.6 Setting the Stage

To grant the reader some background information on how to think about and identify the foreign policy doctrines of the two presidents, this section will begin with a short introduction of the Obama and Trump doctrines. Following that will be some popular criticism of both presidents' Middle Eastern foreign policies to contextualise and underscore why I find this topic so interesting to study, before diving into the theoretical foundation for the thesis.

1.6.1 The Obama Doctrine

Obama himself has described the main schools of thought in American foreign policy as a four-box grid: One of the four boxes he identifies as isolationism, which he dismisses completely, stating that withdrawal is untenable in an ever-shrinking world. The other boxes he labelled as realism, liberal interventionism, and internationalism. Obama agrees with the realist sentiment

that one cannot relieve all the world's misery, but stressed that he was obviously also an internationalist, wanting to strengthen multilateral organisations and international norms (Goldberg, 2016). As we will see later, Obama also had an aversion to liberal interventionism, due to the heavy-handed approach of his predecessor.

More precisely, in relation to the use of force in foreign policy matters, the "Obama doctrine" embraced multilateralism, drone strikes, and a lighter US military presence for instance in Libya, Pakistan, and Yemen, as well as a shift in priorities from the Middle East to the Asia-Pacific. Obama administration officials claimed this was more effective than Bush's heavy approach in Iraq and Afghanistan, and it is emphasised that, if necessary, unilateral use of force would be employed only against what could be perceived as direct threats to the US (Rohde, 2012).

Global security threats such as the situations in Syria and Libya, which indirectly threatened the US, would be responded to multilaterally, and not necessarily by force. The backing of "Arab Spring" protesters in Egypt, Iran and Syria were part of this doctrine, as well as Obama's drawdown of troops both in Iraq and Afghanistan, and the creation of a more agile and smaller military force spread across different regions such as the Pacific, Asia, and the Middle East (Rohde, 2012).

1.6.2 The Trump Doctrine

Most previous US presidents have based their foreign policy doctrines on theories of international relations and behaviours of states in the international system, but in the case of Trump's foreign policy doctrine it seems to be based more on his own personality and life experiences. This allowed for successful relationships with countries that shared views on what was mutually beneficial, take for instance the cooperation with Russia in battling jihadist terrorism. During his time in office, Trump disregarded both domestic and international norms that Obama had tried to reinforce in the international system (Joffe, 2018; Kahl & Brands, 2017).

Trump's approach to foreign policy was highly transactional, resting on his foundational philosophy that life is in essence a zero-sum game, where if you want to win, someone else must lose (Joffe, 2018). His approach was also often unilateral in nature, for instance in his "America first" rhetoric, but also in areas such as foreign economic policy, wherein he believed trade unilateralism would force exploitative trading partners to choose between engaging in a

mutually destructive tariff trade war, or agreeing to renegotiations of trade agreements such as the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and the Free Trade Agreement between the US and Korea (Koh, 2019).

Contrary to the statesmen who crafted and executed the last seventy years of American domestic and foreign policy, it seemed as though Trump had no clear idea about what the ideal world would be like. Assumptions about the expected behavior of states was not something Trump was worried about, or whether states were guided by ideology or interest (Joffe, 2018). In many ways, the Trump doctrine harkens back to pre-1940's America, an America that was primarily a commercial power with scarce interest in global power politics, with the notable exception of protecting itself and its sphere of influence. The lessons learned by the generation that created post-WWII American foreign policy, US-led alliances, and international institutions seemed to be forgotten (Cohen, 2019).

1.6.3 Foreign Policy Critique

The two Presidents are very similar in the way both have received heavy criticism from across the political aisle as well as from their constituents, especially on their Middle Eastern foreign policies.

One of the biggest criticisms of Obama's foreign policy was the intervention in Libya. Most would agree that the intervention and the ousting of Qaddafi was necessary, but the failure to plan for the aftermath and the ensuing chaos, left the country deeply unstable and Obama was criticised for not taking the lessons of Iraq and Afghanistan seriously, which made this the third time in ten years that Washington had embraced regime change with no plan to stabilise the country after toppling the dictator (Tierney, 2016).

No wonder then, that when the time came for Obama to intervene in Syria, he held back, not wanting to get drawn into another endless war in the Middle East. However, considering the tragedy of the war and the resulting refugee crisis, this is one fight he probably should have taken, as a lot of criticism towards the end of his presidency was aimed at his inaction in Syria. In resisting the moral imperative to intervene in a country torn apart by a vicious civil war, he claimed the fight would be too complex, require too many troops and overall be a costly failure (Usher, 2017).

Keeping with his interests of putting “America First”, Trump was heavily criticised for withdrawing from the “endless wars”, mainly in Syria and Afghanistan, which left Kurdish forces to fend for themselves (Wehner, 2019). In 2018, the then Secretary of Defense James Mattis cited this withdrawal as among the reasons for his resignation, showing that even some of Trump’s key staff was critical of his foreign policy decisions (Steff & Tidwell, 2020).

Trump was also heavily criticised for his withdrawal from international deals, like the Paris climate agreement and the Iran nuclear deal. Trump’s announcement to withdraw the US from the Paris climate agreement was met with widespread condemnation, from environmentalists, business executives, and political leaders alike (Carbon Brief Staff, 2017). Similarly, his withdrawal from the Iran nuclear deal was also met with criticism, but the reactions were not as one-sided as with the climate agreement. Saudi Arabia were among those who viewed the withdrawal as a positive. As was Israel’s prime minister at the time Benjamin Netanyahu, who hailed Trump for his “courageous leadership” and praised it as a “historic move”. (Landler, 2018).

Trump was never shy in showing his support for Israel, and in so doing, he was also criticised for his acknowledgement of Jerusalem as its capital and for moving the US embassy there, which many countries (Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates included) called a bad move that could worsen relations between Israelis and Palestinians, and spark more violent conflicts in the region (Noack, 2017). The backlash he received for killing the Iranian general Qasem Soleimani was massive, but this incident reassured Riyadh that Tehran’s continuing regional aggressions were a top priority for US deterrence, and Saudi Arabia was thrilled with Trump’s sudden pushback against Iran after their bombing of Saudi oil facilities (Farouk, 2020).

2.0 Theory

The theory chapter in this thesis will introduce and discuss some of the most central and important theoretical approaches to understanding American foreign policy and international relations and conflict, as well as policy decisions made in relation to the Middle East. This chapter will serve as the foundation for discussion, comparison, and analysis.

The beginning of the chapter starts with explaining why theories are useful analytical tools and how they will be used in this thesis. I briefly go through the reasoning behind the choices I have made regarding the theoretical approaches, and also introduce several secondary theories that can help shed some light on certain aspects of this thesis. After discussing the different secondary theoretical perspectives, the main theories are introduced, before giving some quick geopolitical background and an introduction of the revisionist vs status quo alignments in the Middle East. Following this is a section outlining how the theoretical approaches relate to the thesis, to the foreign policies of Trump and Obama, to the Abraham Accords and the Iran nuclear deal, and to the power dynamics of the Middle East specifically.

2.1 Theory's Utility

“If we could directly apprehend the world that interests us, we would have no need for theory.” (Waltz, 1979, p. 5). Theories are what allows us as humans to better understand complex subjects. Understanding the world or making intelligent decisions would be very difficult without theories helping to simplify the complex world around us (Mearsheimer, 2001).

Kenneth Waltz in his *Theory of International Politics* makes a distinction between reductionist and systemic theories of international politics. Reductionist theories try to explain international outcomes by looking at internal characteristics of states in the international system, whereas systemic theories look at how the overarching structure of the international system shapes behavior between states: “Theories of international politics that concentrate on causes at the individual or national level are reductionist; theories that conceive of causes operating at the international level as well are systemic.” (Waltz, 1979, p. 18). For the main theoretical foundation in this thesis I have decided to employ two systemic or structural, if you will, theories of international relations, simply based on the reason that I agree with Waltz, in that structural theories have greater explanatory power, for instance, Waltz argues that: “Each state arrives at policies and decides on actions according to its own internal process, but its decisions are shaped by the very presence of other states as well as by interactions with them” (Waltz,

1979, p. 65). This does not mean that domestic level factors are omitted simply due to their reductionist nature, but that ultimately, structural theories tend to have a more comprehensive answer to the questions one might ask about international relations.

The two main theories I have chosen is offensive and defensive realism. They can be viewed as two sides of the same coin, wherein they are both structural theories of international relations that see the overarching structure of the international system as the chief explaining factor for international outcomes. Where they mainly differ is in how much power states should seek to gain, and how far they would go in pursuing it. The end goal for great power states according to offensive realism is power-maximation in order to establish hegemonic rule, whereas defensive realism has a built in status-quo bias and posits that a balancing behaviour is the correct approach to the security dilemma and arguing for maximising security without threatening other states so as to not upset the balance of power (Baylis, Smith, & Owens, 2020; Mearsheimer, 2001; R. Schweller, 1996; Taliaferro, 2001; Waltz, 1979). This view of the international system can help explain the two international deals and the foreign policies of both presidents.

2.2 Understanding International Relations and Foreign Policy

During the early phases of this project, there were many different theories that I considered that could be helpful in understanding foreign policy and international relations. This section will outline where my thought-process started, how it evolved, and what I landed on in the end as a theoretical foundation for my thesis. Among the theories considered were Liberalism, Institutionalism, the rational perspective, political psychology, foreign policy analysis, the behavioural approach, governance, populism, and mercantilism to name but a few of the many available theoretical approaches that could have served a useful function in this thesis.

However, as in most cases when talking about international relations, the one theory that seems to always win out as the most comprehensive and with the greatest explanatory power is realism, which will be the main theoretical focus in this thesis. Realism is the dominant theory of international relations, because according to realists, it provides the most powerful explanation for the state of war in the international system (Baylis et al., 2020). Before diving into realism however, some secondary theory will be discussed, namely two-level game theory, neoclassical realism, and the 'hub-and-spoke' approach. These secondary theories provide some excellent context to consider when analysing international relations, relating to domestic politics and multilateralism.

2.2.1 Two-Level Game Theory

Robert D. Putnam is widely regarded as the godfather of the two-level game theory, his 1988 article: *Diplomacy and domestic politics: the logic of two-level games*, has had a great deal of influence on the field of international relations. In it, Putnam aims to contextualise the state-centric views of the predominant theories of international relations, by reintroducing domestic level factors, and claiming that domestic politics and international relations are intertwined and entangled in each other, and that they both influence and impact one another in some way, implying a necessary consideration of both factors in explanations of international outcomes (Putnam, 1988). Given that the primary goal of any government is to retain power, Putnam's proposition is that any international agreement or negotiation will only succeed if it is acceptable to both governments involved, and sufficiently satisfies their domestic constituencies (Hurst, 2016).

This approach to international relations views the positions of national leaders as having to play two games at the same time: the interstate negotiations of the international system, and their domestic political situations (J. W. Knopf, 1993; Putnam, 1988). Putnam concludes that this was one of the most important developments in comparative politics and international relations: “[...] the dawning recognition among practitioners in each field of the need to take into account entanglements between the two. Empirical illustrations of reciprocal influence between domestic and international affairs abound.” (Putnam, 1988, p. 459).

The framework of the two-level game theory sees constituents and interest groups pressuring the government to adopt favourable policies, while at the international level governments must attempt to meet this domestic pressure and simultaneously react to, and leverage the impacts of international events, whether good or bad (Bjola & Manor, 2018). Putting Obama and Trump into this framework will allow for some insight into how their domestic situations have impacted some of their foreign policy decisions (and vice-versa), this becomes especially visible when we consider Trump and his bid for re-election in 2020, and how the Abraham Accords were timed to give him a massive boost to his foreign policy record (Borger, 2020).

2.2.2 Neoclassical Realism

Another attempt at bringing the state and domestic politics back into the equation is neoclassical realism, coined in 1998 by Gideon Rose, the theory springs forth from a review article in which he claimed the four books he was reviewing constituted a new school of international relations theory. Rose claims the new school is characterised both by the insights of Kenneth Waltz and

neorealism, and the traditional views of classical realist Hans Morgenthau. By this he means that neoclassical realists agree with the neorealist argument that states formulate their foreign policy by responding to constraints and opportunities in the international system, but that they don't exclude domestic level analysis and simultaneously reject the implications of balance-of-power theory in neorealism, that states fluidly and rationally react to international changes (Ripsman, Taliaferro, & Lobell, 2016).

Neoclassical realists argue that, by and large, states respond to the constraints and opportunities that exist within the international system whenever they formulate foreign and security policy, and that these responses are shaped by factors that can be found at the unit-level, such as state-society relations, the domestic political structures, the perceptions of leaders, and a state's strategic culture (Ripsman, 2011). How leaders perceive the distribution of power, as well as systemic constraints and opportunities is also an important variable to consider in neoclassical realism and adds some important context to domestic politics and international relations. There is no true objective perception of any of these aspects, so leaders might make different choices based on their subjective perceptions of systemic pressure (Baylis et al., 2020).

In neoclassical realism, foreign policy behavior is then viewed as systemic pressures that have been filtered through intervening domestic-level factors. States constantly have to judge and evaluate their external environments, and they adapt to changes partly due to complex domestic political processes that act as conveyor belts for foreign policy output, which is mostly meant to address external changes in relative power (R. L. Schweller, 2004). This means that states often can have completely different reactions to the exact same external systemic pressure and opportunity, simply due to differences in domestic political situations, meaning that their responses to change in the international system can be motivated more by domestic factors than by systemic ones (R. L. Schweller, 2004).

2.2.3 The 'Hub-and-Spoke' Approach

John Foster Dulles, the US Secretary of State under Dwight D. Eisenhower was the man to popularise the 'hub-and-spoke' terminology, referring to the bilateral alliances that the US had in East Asia with Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan. The fact that these alliances did not evolve into a multilateral alliance, in spite of the existing common threats from the Soviet Union, China, and North Korea, puzzled political scientists for a long time. Today, the main explanation for this in both realist and constructivist schools is that it is what the US wanted, and that this system best served their interests (Izumikawa, 2020).

The hub-and-spoke system, also known as the San Francisco System (Cha, 2010), was used extensively in the establishment of Asian regional security cooperation, with the US as the central hub forming bilateral security alliances with several countries in the region. It was effective in the post-Cold War period at deterring aggression and maintaining stability in East Asia (Koga, 2011).

Now, although the ‘hub-and-spoke’ alliance system is mostly used to refer to the security policies of the Asia-Pacific (Park, 2011), an argument can be made that Trump and his administration borrowed from this system, as the Abraham Accords emulate them to a high degree, with the US negotiating from a central position, acting as a hub, and establishing bilateral ties between Israel and four Arab nations, where the ‘spokes’ have no apparent connection to each other, as was the case in the Asia Pacific (Cha, 2010). This approach to multilateral security cooperation is quite different from Trump’s foreign policy in general, which, as we have seen, has tended towards being more unilateral in nature.

2.3 Realism

Ever since Hans Morgenthau introduced classical realism as an approach to the study of international relations, it has been widely regarded as one of the most important theoretical schools of international relations. It is therefore vital to have a firm grasp of it in order to understand war and peace in the international system. It has withstood unrelenting assault from external sources with liberalism at the helm, and it has also been tested from within by various different sub-theories and offshoots of realism. Today, the field of international relations contains many different types of realism, ranging from classical to neoclassical, structural, defensive or neorealism, as well as offensive realism (Snyder, 2002).

When it comes to international relations, realists are pessimists. Although they agree with liberalists that creating everlasting peace worldwide would be highly desirable, there is no getting around the realities of conflict and war, and the fact that states are competing against each other in the security arena. This pessimistic outlook on world politics and international relations embedded in realist theory is based on three main beliefs. The first being that sovereign states are the primary actors in the international system, and for realists mainly great power states, not only because they can dominate and shape the international system, but also because they are the originators of the deadliest wars. The sovereignty aspect comes from Max Weber’s definition of the state as having a monopoly on violence and legitimate use of force (Baylis et al., 2020; Mearsheimer, 2001).

Determining which states are great powers is not always easy, but the general claim is, that to qualify as a great power, a state has to have sufficient military capability and assets in order to put up a fight against even the strongest and most dominant state in the system. A great power does not necessarily need the capabilities to defeat such an opponent, but the minimum requirement is survival in the form of a war of attrition which weakens the opponent (Mearsheimer, 2001).

Secondly, realists posit that all states have survival as their number one priority and is a precondition for all other goals a state could pursue. This second belief also ties in that states are mostly influenced by the structure of the international system, meaning foreign policies are shaped by their external rather than internal environments (Baylis et al., 2020). Lastly, the lack of higher authority in the international system means states have to look out for themselves, war is always a looming threat and states must rely on themselves for security. However, this leads to a spiralling situation called the security dilemma, in which one states' search for power leads to insecurity for others (Baylis et al., 2020).

2.3.1 Offensive Realism

John J. Mearsheimer is famous in the world of political science for the development of offensive realism in his book: *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*. In this book he lays out the key components of the theory. Like realism, the focus of offensive realism is on great powers, simply due to the fact that they have the greatest impact on international outcomes. The argument being that the prosperity of all states in the international system are dictated by those with the greatest capabilities (Mearsheimer, 2001). The clearest example of this is how the Cold War, a war between two potential hegemonies, shaped the entire international system and the daily life for the majority of states for decades, every region in the world was influenced heavily by the conflict between the Soviet Union and The United States (Mearsheimer, 2001).

Offensive realism has five bedrock assumptions about the international system, which in contrast to many other theoretical assumptions represent a realistic outlook on the world and the life of states in the international system. The first assumption being that the system is anarchic in nature, and not in a way to say chaotic or disorderly, but in the sense that there is no central authority above the state level, and no Leviathan to offer states protection (Mearsheimer, 2001; Pashakhanlou, 2013; Snyder, 2002).

Assumption number two is that states possess some form of offensive capability, enabling them to potentially destroy other states. Third is the fact that a state can never be completely certain about other states intentions, as international relations is characterised by uncertainty, and no state can be certain that any other state will not turn their offensive capabilities towards them at any time (Mearsheimer, 2001; Pashakhanlou, 2013; Snyder, 2002).

The fourth assumption is that survival is the ultimate goal of a sovereign state, simply due to the fact that survival is a pre-requisite for all other state goals, as once conquered, a state cannot meaningfully pursue anything else. The fifth and final assumption is that great powers are rational actors, meaning they keep an eye on their external environments and think about how best to survive in it, keeping in mind consequences of immediate actions as well as paying attention to long term outcomes. This rationality assumption implies that any given state considers the actions and preferences of others and how their own behavior affects them, as well as how the behavior of others can affect their own security (Mearsheimer, 2001; Pashakhanlou, 2013; Snyder, 2002).

It is crucially emphasised that none of these assumptions taken as one would dictate great powers behave aggressively towards each other as a general rule. However, when all assumptions are taken into consideration combined, they are seen as the explaining factors for why some states think and act offensively, and in particular, three patterns of behavior emerge: fear, self-help, and power maximation (Mearsheimer, 2001).

As we have just seen, according to one of the five bedrock assumptions of offensive realism, the anarchic nature of the international system and the absence of a supranational government provides great incentive for expansionist foreign policy. In such a system only the strongest and most powerful states can survive, this means all states seek to maximize their relative power to ensure survival. Such opportunistic, expansionist behavior can take the form of arms build-ups, unilateral diplomacy, and mercantile foreign economic policy (Taliaferro, 2001).

2.3.2 Defensive Realism

Defensive realism, often called “Neorealism” or “Structural realism” came about in the 1970’s, particularly with the work of Kenneth Waltz and his *Theory of International Politics*. Waltz bases his theory around the idea that states, specifically great power states, do not seek power, but survival. Above all else, Waltz contends that state security is paramount. Structural realism, by virtue of the name, agrees that great powers have to abide by the structure of the international

system and pay close attention to the balance of power. The anarchic nature of the system forces great powers to compete for power, as it is the most important factor in the search for security (Mearsheimer, 2001).

Waltz bases his theory on these following assumptions: Firstly, states are the main actors in the international system. Secondly, the international system is not governed by any supranational authority with a monopoly on violence such as in a domestic hierarchical structure. Thirdly, this lack of a central governing authority means each and every state must ensure their own security, depending on relative power and capabilities, and lastly, states behave as though they are unitary rational actors (Mansfield, 1993; Waltz, 1979).

In Morgenthau's classical realism, human nature is viewed as the cause for competition in the security arena, whereas for Waltz, anarchy inhabits that role. Offensive realism tells us that the international system provides a great incentive for expansionist behaviour, but Waltz claims the opposite is true, in the face of anarchy, great power states should behave defensively. Rather than upset the balance of power, they should seek to maintain it as best they can, not jeopardising their place in the system. As we have seen, Waltz and his theory have been criticised for having a "status quo bias" (Mearsheimer, 2001; R. Schweller, 1996). The status quo bias arises from neorealists attempting to deemphasise the interests of states, overlooking the importance of non-security expansion, the main revisionist goal. Structure alone, as in the number of great power states and the anarchic order, cannot account for international outcomes and behaviours as Waltz's theory claims (R. Schweller, 1996).

Defensive realism agrees to some extent with offensive realism that the anarchic international system incentivises expansionist behavior, but only under certain conditions and only to some extent. States increasing their own security in an anarchic system will inevitably decrease the security of others, creating the aforementioned security dilemma which causes states to worry about each other's future intentions and relative capabilities (Taliaferro, 2001).

Both offensive and defensive realism are in a sense "structural" theories of international politics, seeing as they agree that the structure of the international system is what forces states to compete for power, where they differ is in just how much power they should seek to gain, and how far they are willing to go in order to gain it. Where the defensive side of the argument is restraint, and to behave in a balancing manner and maintain the status quo, offensive realism argues for power maximation, where violent expansionist behaviour is not out of the question. Offensive realists believe status quo powers are rare in the international system, as the system

is seen to provide a great incentive to gain power at the expense of rivals and to become the dominant power, with hegemonic rule being the ultimate goal (Mearsheimer, 2001).

2.4 Geopolitics and Middle Eastern Alignment

I would like to preface this section with a quick reiteration of the scope of this project, namely the minimal focus on historical events and religious aspects, however I do deem it necessary to have this short introduction to geopolitics in the Middle East and specifically the division that exists between states in the region based on their international behaviours and ambitions. When I say geopolitics, it is referring to how one state's size, political power, geographical position, and regional influence can impact other states ("Geopolitics," 2022).

The Middle East is currently, and has been for a long time, divided into two separate alignments, called the revisionist and the status quo alignments. In the mid-1950's the status quo alignment evolved, with a group of Middle Eastern states that had close relations or an alliance with the United States (Yossef, 2021). During the Cold War, the two superpowers in the United States and the Soviet Union, went about trying to win over states in the Middle East. The US managed to flip Egypt in the 70's, making them the newest member of a group of states including Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and Israel, as well as some Gulf states (Cook, 2022).

The following decades saw the US get more directly involved in the region, and these states formed the core of the US-friendly group that gave Washington an easier time pursuing their regional goals, this included protection of Israel, securing oil-supply, and countering terrorism (Cook, 2022). This is known as the status quo alignment, and the members of this alignment assert non-interference norms, they want to cooperate with the West and accommodate western powers as regional security guarantors, they seek coexistence with Israel, and want a peaceful solution to the Arab-Israeli conflict (Yossef, 2021).

The revisionist alignment on the other hand, are hostile towards western interference in the Middle East, perceiving them as wanting to dominate the region. Revisionists can be categorised as either Arab nationalist or Islamist countries and are more inclined to engage in armed conflict with Israel and try to impose their revolutionary ideas on status quo powers (Yossef, 2021). According to realism, the anarchic nature of the international system forces states to seek security and autonomy, the more concerned a state is with security-seeking and the more preoccupied they are with preserving state autonomy, the more likely it is a rising state will become revisionist and vice versa declining states will become status-quo seekers,

and try to maintain their position in the system (Davidson, 2006). Here we can see the relevance of both defensive and offensive realism.

In classical and neoclassical realist theory, revisionism and status-quo seeking is defined by their relation to states' ambitions internationally, revisionist states are those who seek power-maximisation, whereas status-quo seekers look to maximise security above all else (Davidson, 2006). This definition, although neat and tidy, does not lend itself well to explaining international outcomes. For instance, how can it be determined whether a state seeks to maximise power or security, and why are the two concepts thought of as mutually exclusive? A better way to look at these concepts is through Arnold Wolfers' definition where revisionists seek values they do not currently possess, and status-quo states seek to maintain the values it already has (Davidson, 2006; Wolfers, 1962).

Values in this context can refer to desired goods, such as territory, status, markets, ideology, and the creation or change of international institutions and law. For instance, According to this definition, a state is revisionist if it is trying to convert others to its ideology, or make them abandon an ideology they already hold (Davidson, 2006). Easy to see then that Iran and their constant efforts to promote their Islamist ideals and expand their sphere of influence in the Middle East can be firmly categorised as a revisionist state, and in the same vein; Israel and Saudi Arabia and their cooperation with the US and the West on security issues, can be thought of as status quo states. In both cases however, the revisionist states and status quo states view their positions in the alignment as being beneficial to their relative power in the international system.

2.5 Theoretical Relevance

The secondary theories discussed in the beginning of this chapter gives the reader a solid introduction to the theoretical foundation of this thesis, with two-level game theory and neoclassical realism explaining the way domestic level factors can impact foreign policy formation, and how international relations and domestic politics must be considered together in order to get a complete picture of international outcomes. The 'Hub-and-Spoke' alliance system shows us the base structure of the Abraham Accords and how Trump borrowed from this system in his attempt at a multilateral solution to regional security cooperation in the Middle East.

My two main theories of choice in offensive and defensive realism are very helpful in understanding the foreign policy of the two presidents, whereas Trump is seen as more of a transactional and business-minded President, Obama is widely regarded as a diplomatic and

militarily reticent President in the international arena, as he tried to involve more allies and partners in sharing some of the burdens in the international system, as well as offering dialogue towards enemies of America, such as with Iran (Nünlist, 2016). Offensive realism, as explained above, posits that expansionist and aggressive behavior can take the form of unilateral diplomacy and mercantile foreign economic policy, and it is therefore clear to see how Trump can be categorised as an offensive realist in some sense, as much of his foreign policy has been both transactional and unilateral in nature (Joffe, 2018).

Defensive realists see the war-causing potential of anarchy as something that can be attenuated, seeing as great powers tend to be conservative in the nuclear age, their argument being, that the harder it is to conquer someone, the more secure all states can be. This argument rests on the fact that both balance of power, and technological developments act as a deterrence, imagine for instance trying to conquer states that are part of a great military alliance or that has nuclear capabilities. Under these conditions one could expect states to defend themselves in an anarchic world without threatening others, or to signal their peaceful intentions, resulting in an international system with greater potential for peace than realists previously argued (Wohlforth, 2012). Following this logic, the way Obama negotiated for the Iran nuclear deal can be understood as the actions of a defensive realist, looking to not upset the balance of power but rather an effort to maintain the status quo. This will be explained further in the coming sections.

Offensive realists on the other hand, argue that with no authority to enforce agreements, states could never be sure that peaceful intentions today would remain so in the future. Even if the prospect of conquest may be impossible today due to geography, technology or group identity, there is no guarantee that someone in the future might develop ways to overcome such challenges. This uncertainty means states can never be totally confident in their own security and must always view other states' increasing power as suspicious and potentially dangerous. In such a system, states can be tempted to expand, strengthen themselves, or weaken others, in order to survive long-term (Wohlforth, 2012).

Being distrustful of other's intentions is something one could associate with Trump's character, especially considering China and their massive gains of both economic and political power in recent years and how Trump sought to handle that situation with his foreign economic policy (Koh, 2019). This notion of offensive realism that relative power gain is more important than absolute gains in security is something we therefore can attribute to Trump's foreign policy, given his previously explained zero-sum ideology. The short section on geopolitics and Middle

Eastern alignment viewed through a realist lens, helps contextualize the conflicts in the region and also provides some key insight into the inner-workings of different states and their behaviours in the international system, as well as explain how they think about power and security.

3.0 Methodology

In any research endeavour it is important to fit the methodology to the task at hand. Seeing as there are few, if any, real quantitative measures on the differences between Trump and Obamas foreign policy records and the impact of their respective international deals, I chose to employ a qualitative methodology when researching and writing this thesis.

Qualitative research is viewed as any kind of research that produces findings which are not based on any kind of statistical procedures or other quantitative processes. Where quantitative research aims at establishing causal links, generating predictions and generalisation, qualitative research seeks to illuminate a subject and enhance our understanding about a particular topic (Golafshani, 2003, p. 600). During the research process of this thesis, I have gathered and read numerous research articles, journal entries, policy papers, news stories, government reports, speeches, etc. and after a long and thorough process, I have filtered out what I believe to be the most relevant literature for the empirical basis of this thesis. Being a qualitative body of work, the methodology chapter will reflect this as I go on to talk about the literature review and how I related to the concepts of validity and reliability in my thesis.

3.1 Literature Review

The research in this thesis was done through a qualitative literature review, pertaining to the different topics discussed in the thesis. This thesis seeks to analyse and discuss qualitative differences in Trump and Obama's Middle Eastern foreign policy, their approaches to multilateralism, and the impact of their international deals, it is therefore natural to employ a literature review in order to gauge qualitative similarities and differences in foreign policy, as well as qualitative changes in key factors regarding regional security in the Middle East as a result of the Iran nuclear deal and the Abraham Accords.

The literature review is one of the most important steps in the research process, both in qualitative and quantitative, as well as in mixed research projects. An extensive review of literature can yield a great many benefits, including but not limited to: determining what has been done and what needs doing, identifying relationships between theory and practice, identifying inconsistencies and contradictions, and exposing strengths and weaknesses in a body of work (Onwuegbuzie, Leech, & Collins, 2012). A literature review is a process that can be defined as: "an interpretation of a selection of published and/or unpublished documents available from various sources on a specific topic that optimally involves summarization,

analysis, evaluation, and synthesis of the documents” (Onwuegbuzie et al., 2010, p. 173 cited in; Onwuegbuzie et al., 2012, p. 2).

In this instance the specific topic is American foreign policy in the Middle East. Information about this topic has been carefully selected based on the relevance to my particular interest in the foreign policy of Trump and Obama and their deals, the Abraham Accords, the Iran nuclear deal, and how they have impacted the Middle East. Following this research methodology, I have, to the best of my ability, interpreted the many literary works by summarising, analysing, evaluating, and synthesising their contents into a coherent thesis that seeks to explain the qualitative differences and similarities in Trump and Obama’s general foreign policy, their approach to multilateral agreements in security cooperation, and how their most important international deals affected the political landscape of the Middle East.

3.2 Validity and Reliability

“Without rigor, research is worthless, becomes fiction, and loses its utility.” (Morse, Barrett, Mayan, Olson, & Spiers, 2002, p. 14). This is referring to reliability and validity in all research methodology, however, these terms are somewhat difficult to operate with in a qualitative setting. The terms have very specific meanings in quantitative research such as statistics and natural sciences but take on different meanings in qualitative social sciences. They have been substituted with terms such as “trustworthiness”, which entails several different aspects: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Morse et al., 2002). Over the past twenty years or so, reliability and validity in qualitative research has been replaced by criteria and evaluation standards that look at the significance, relevance, impact and utility of a body of research (Morse et al., 2002).

In quantitative research the idea of reliability refers to the reproduction of a study based on similar methodology, whereas in qualitative research it has taken on a different meaning, namely as previously mentioned, the concepts of trustworthiness and dependability, which is a measure of research quality. A good body of qualitative research can help us understand topics that would otherwise be confusing. Reliability then, is understood as a measure of how trustworthy the body of work is based on the methodological adherence of the researcher and the rigorousness in the research process (Golafshani, 2003, p. 601).

The concept of validity in qualitative research has undergone some necessary transformations in order to strengthen the contributions for development of qualitative knowledge. To begin

with, same as with reliability, conceptualisations of validity was derived from their quantitative counterparts in standards set by experimental research based on positivist philosophy (Whittemore, Chase, & Mandle, 2001). Whereas reliability in qualitative research refers mostly to the stability of findings, validity has come to represent the truthfulness of the findings and whether or not it accurately describes or evaluates the subject in question (Golafshani, 2003; Whittemore et al., 2001, p. 523).

To make sure that the information that forms the empirical basis for analysis in this thesis is of high quality, that it is credible, trustworthy, and dependable, and that it accurately describes and evaluates the subject at hand, some precautionary action is necessary. For instance, I have made sure that all the information I've chosen to include comes from dependable and trustworthy sources. During the research process, especially when gathering secondary sources, I used mainly the most trusted and reputable information hubs available, such as: Google Scholar, Jstor, SAGE Journals, HeinOnline, ResearchGate, Taylor & Francis, to name some of the information hubs and search engines for academic journals and literature utilised in this thesis. This research process has also required of me to find primary sources of information, such as presidential speeches and government documents such as the various National Security Strategy documents outlining the foreign policy goals and priorities of a given administration, which are easily found on the governmental websites.

Another important point that has been addressed in order to increase the dependability of my thesis, is the fact that most information about American foreign policy is highly polarised due mostly to the nature of the American two-party system, which means information often comes with some bias attached. This is true for Obama, but especially when talking about Trump, some authors will be overly critical and others overly enthusiastic about his foreign policy records, and it is important that as a researcher, I can identify these biases and balance them out in order to ensure some semblance of objectivity wherever necessary. This means that when citing some works and sources, I have made sure to look at both negative and positive comments on certain issues and not letting the personal opinions of authors come to the forefront, but rather trying to highlight their objective analysis of any given topic.

Verifying relevancy of secondary sources was done mostly by looking at citations, as the number of citations an article or a piece of information has, usually is a good measure of how relevant said information is. However, in this case, studying the fairly recent Abraham Accords, I expected the number of citations to be lower than usual, say for instance when looking at

articles discussing well-established theories such as offensive and defensive realism, which can have thousands of citations. On the older topics such as Obama's foreign policy and the Iran nuclear deal, this method proved to be more useful as it has had some time to be studied.

This, however, does not mean that all articles with few or no citations have been discarded simply for this reason, in some cases I have chosen to cite such articles, but in doing so I was sure to be extra careful and made sure that it came from a trusted source, such as well a known university or a well-respected academic journal or news-outlet, in these cases I also tried to find multiple sources on the same topic to corroborate the information. Seeing as the Abraham Accords are relatively new, it is hard to rely solely on well-established journals and academic sources when conducting research on their significance for Middle Eastern politics and power dynamics, so a number of online newspapers have been used for context and relevant information where needed.

3.3 Preliminary Findings

This section will present some of the central findings that I have gathered during my research process, the findings are only quickly introduced here and will be discussed in detail in the next chapter. I have separated the findings into corresponding categories with the research questions in mind:

- **Comparisons on foreign policy and international deals**
 - Although Trump and Obama are very much opposites in their personalities, their worldviews and resulting foreign policies were not all that different, and Trump's doctrine was not a negation of Obama's, exemplified by how both wanted to focus on nation-building at home, drawing down forces in the Middle East (Cohen, 2019; Tierney, 2019).
 - The Abraham Accords and the Iran Nuclear deal can be looked at as a reflection of the two presidents' personalities: Trump's transactional approach reflects his distrust of Iran and his wish that Washington should be the sole negotiator for peace in the Middle East, not wanting to include other players such as China and Russia (Kahl & Brands, 2017). Obama on the other hand tried his hand at a traditional multilateral solution, involving both Iran, the UNSC, and the EU showing his preference for diplomacy and dialogue in

conflict-resolution (Branda, 2018; Nünlist, 2016; Samore et al., 2015).

- The fact that Obama did not have to worry about re-election let him make some important concessions to Iran to allow for ratification of the JCPOA (Hurst, 2016). The timing of the Abraham Accords were also a way for Trump to boost his foreign policy record ahead of the 2020 election (Borger, 2020). This shows the importance of domestic situations in international agreements, and the folly that is ignoring them in an analysis of international outcomes.
- The Abraham Accords and the JCPOA differ in the way they were meant to deal with Iran's international ambitions and destructive intentions towards Israel and the Gulf states. The JCPOA was a deal reached with Iran through two years of negotiations with the EU and the UN security council (the US, Russia, China, France, and the UK) plus Germany (P5+1) (Samore et al., 2015). The Abraham Accords however, were Trump's shot at multilateralism, in US-brokered deals designed to increase bilateral ties between Israel and four Arab states, one approach directly targeting the nuclear ambitions of Iran, the other indirectly trying to contain Iranian aggression by enhancing ties between several of Iran's main adversaries.
- The Abraham Accords are seen as a formalisation of already existing relationships, wherein Israel and the four signatories of the Accords have already cooperated tacitly in the past on security issues, the aspect of security cooperation seem to not change much from the JCPOA to the Accords (Yoel Guzansky & Marshall, 2020; Yossef, 2021). However, there is potential for the Accords to increase security cooperation by focusing on intelligence- and information-sharing between the countries. There is also the confidence-building aspect of staff officer visits between states (Miller & Perkins, 2020).

- **Reasons for normalisation and risks**

- The United Arab Emirates: Arms deal worth \$23 billion, and concessions from Israel on halting annexation of West Bank territories (Magid, 2021; Singer,

2021).

- Bahrain: Saraya Al-Mokhtar designated a terrorist organization under US law, also joined the UAE in seeking to halt annexations on the West Bank (Singer, 2021).
- Sudan: Was removed from the list of countries sponsoring terrorism, many economic sanctions lifted (Brakel, 2020; Lanteigne, 2020; Singer, 2021).
- Morocco: US recognition of the Western Sahara as Moroccan territory (Lanteigne, 2020; Magid, 2021; Singer, 2021).
- The Accords are a step in the direction to solidify a de facto alliance between Israel and the Gulf's Sunni States against their shared enemy in Shiite Iran, strengthening the Status quo alignment vs. the Revisionist alignment (Crowley, 2020; Yossef, 2021).
- The many geopolitical changes in the Middle East since the Cold War, is what opened up the door and let Gulf countries try to fill the power vacuum (Ferziger & Bahgat, 2020; Schatz, 2020)
- There are substantial risks tied to the Accords, in the Israel-Palestine conflict not being addressed, trouble with US recognition of the Western Sahara as Moroccan territory, and the dangers of an isolated and cornered Iran (Lanteigne, 2020; Miller & Perkins, 2020; Yossef, 2021)

- **Impacts on key countries and future expectations**

- Israel benefits the most from the Abraham Accords, seeing gains in their economy, benefitting strategically, and realising geopolitical advantages (Maital & Barzani, 2021).

- Iran is among the bigger losers in the Accords, seeing the Gulf states partner with Israel to counter their regional ambitions and deterring them from expanding their sphere of influence, this is underscored further by Trump's withdrawal from the JCPOA and reintroducing harsh sanctions (Mortlock, 2020; Tárík, 2022).
- Saudi Arabia and other countries will need substantial incentives from the US if they are to join the Abraham Accords and Saudi Arabia have held fast in their conviction that a two-state solution in the Israel-Palestine conflict is key if they are to normalise relations with Israel (Jordans & Batrawy, 2020; Magid, 2021).
- The Palestinians are also one of the big losers in the context of the Abraham Accords as the deals do not focus on this conflict, the Gulf states entering into normalisation with Israel has broken with the Arab League and their 2002 Arab Peace Initiative (API) and criticism of the Accords claim the two-state solution is weakened as a result (Singer, 2021; Yossef, 2021).
- The economic aspect of the Accords are the most exciting in terms of future expectations, with vast potential identified should the Accords be expanded to other Arab states (Egel, Efron, & Robinson, 2021).

4.0 Discussion and Analysis

This main section of the thesis will begin with a short introduction to US foreign policy in the Middle East, before presenting Obama's general foreign policy and the Iran nuclear deal. Following this will be Trump's foreign policy and the creation of the Abraham Accords, what the Accords mean for the affected countries, as well as other countries in the Middle East, especially considering Israel, Iran, and Saudi Arabia, and implications for other Gulf states. There will be a focus on both positive foreign policy outcomes as well as some potential risks. Before getting into the Accords themselves however, the sections on Obama and Trump will quickly introduce the main problems and conflicts that shaped the region during their presidencies and present the general foreign policy goals of the respective administrations.

US foreign policy in the Middle East has for many years been formed on the basis of two main principles: Protecting Israel and securing oil supplies from the Persian Gulf (Ferziger & Bahgat, 2020). Ever since Israel's creation in 1948, US presidents have tried to balance relationships with both Israel and Arab Gulf states, trying to navigate the conflicts between them. In recent years however, the relationships between Israel and the Gulf states have started to turn for the better, and the hostility between them has begun to dissipate. The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) consisting of Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar, and Oman, has started showing a new interest in creating ties with Israel, as well as with Jewish figures in the US (Ferziger & Bahgat, 2020).

This renewed interest for normalisation stems not only from the shared perception that Iran is the main enemy in the Middle East, but also from diplomatic fatigue after seventy years of fighting Israel and supporting the Palestinians, with no real resolution in sight. These political reasons for Gulf States seeking to normalise their relations with Israel are also accompanied by developmental and economic reasons, for instance, missing out on Israeli technological innovations in cybersecurity, desert agriculture and their medical research prowess, for instance when it comes to dealing with the Coronavirus (Ferziger & Bahgat, 2020).

4.1 Leading from Behind

Presidents visiting Prime Ministers in foreign countries has always been an important diplomatic tool, both in an official and a public capacity. Officially, such diplomacy sees the visitor meeting with policymakers and important figureheads of the country in question. Here they can share ideas, exchange information, and talk about points of mutual interest. Public

diplomacy has a clear goal of influencing public opinion, and some crucial tools in this regard are media interviews before arrival, giving statements before and after official meetings with Prime Ministers, visiting places that hold symbolic value, and deliver dramatic speeches to promote the interests of their country (Gilboa, 2013).

Barack Obama visited the Middle East during the start of both of his terms, however the two visits were vastly different. His first term saw him visiting Turkey in April 2009, then in June the same year visiting Egypt, but not stopping by Israel, in fact, not visiting Israel at all during his first term. His visits to Turkey and Egypt were seen as an attempt at reconciling the US and the Arab-Muslim world after the turbulent years of Bush and his war on terror. With public sentiment about Obama being quite low in Israel, he began his second term with a visit to Israel as a way of trying to repair relations with then Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and the Israeli public (Gilboa, 2013).

One of Obama's ambitions in foreign policy was to draw a stark contrast to his predecessor. Whereas Bush had refused to "negotiate with evil", Obama, with both action and rhetoric, showed that he would not shy away from engaging politically with America's enemies. This was demonstrated clearly by his visits to the Middle East (Gerges, 2013). The Obama doctrine – "Leading from behind", was a very accurate way to describe his foreign policy, he kept the US largely in the background and paid close attention to what was happening on the main stage of international politics. This was clearly his intention, especially after his predecessor's heavy interventionism in the Middle East. He tried to turn attention away from interventionism and pivot to focus on trade and commerce, relying more on soft power (Branda, 2018).

After the Bush era, Obama built his foreign policy on two main principles, firstly, a policy of engagement designed to restore global trust and confidence in the US. This involved active efforts to repair damaged international relations with transatlantic partners, as well as increased diplomacy with America's enemies. Secondly, the strategic and military overreach during Bush's two terms saw Obama focus more on exercising global leadership in a less expensive way. Long military operations such as counterinsurgency campaigns were abandoned, and military force was utilised in a more discrete manner, making room for allies and partners to contribute more significantly (Branda, 2018; Nünlist, 2016). This is in line with the Obama "doctrine" that was identified in the introduction, the greater focus on multilateral action and not necessarily military force, but diplomatic efforts.

During Obama's first term, the great conflict in the Middle East was based much in the Israel-Palestine conflict, as we can see in the National Security Strategy (NSS) of May 2010:

"The United States, Israel, the Palestinians, and the Arab States have an interest in a peaceful resolution of the Arab-Israeli conflict – one in which the legitimate aspirations of Israelis and Palestinians for security and dignity are realized, and Israel achieves a secure and lasting peace with all of its neighbors." (National Security Strategy, 2010, p. 26)

It becomes clear that the Obama administration viewed this conflict as among the most pressing for regional stability and security in the early years of his presidency. However, the threat of revisionist Iran was not a minor one, and in the NSS, they also identify the Islamic republic of Iran as one of the most dangerous and disruptive forces in the region. Mentioning their disregard for international responsibilities, denying their own people their universal human rights, their illicit nuclear program, as well as their continued support of terrorism, which was undermining much of the peacebuilding efforts between Israelis and Palestinians (National Security Strategy, 2010).

As illustrated, after his first term in office, Obama's standing in Israel was not the greatest, in fact, according to a 2012 poll, only twenty-three percent of the Israeli population viewed Obama favourably, and forty-one percent were dissatisfied with his policies on the Israel-Palestine conflict. Obama needed to better his standing and reputation in Israel and win over public opinion if he wanted to have any success whatsoever in dealing with the problems of nuclear Iran and the negotiations with the Palestinians (Gilboa, 2013).

One of the most important aspects of his visit to Israel at the start of his second term was making sure Netanyahu and Israel did not pre-emptively strike Iran before all other options, such as sanctions and diplomatic measures, had been exhausted. Obama promised Netanyahu that if those two options failed he would do "whatever is necessary", implying a full-scale military campaign to stop Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons (Gilboa, 2013). Of course, we now know how this unfolded, and two years after his visit to Israel, Obama did succeed in bringing Iran to the table and make a deal.

4.1.1 The Iran Nuclear Deal

The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), also known as the Iran nuclear deal, was announced on the 14th of July 2015 in Vienna, Austria. It had taken nearly two years of international negotiations to get this deal in place, some thirteen years after Iran's nuclear activities was made known to the world (Samore et al., 2015). The deal made between the

Islamic Republic of Iran, the High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, and the UNSC plus Germany (P5+1, known in Europe as E3+3) ("Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action," 2015; Keating, 2009), was one that pleased many western powers, however the deal did little to address Iran's belligerent interests in the Middle East as well as their long-term nuclear ambitions (C. Jones & Guzansky, 2017).

The intention of the JCPOA was to stop Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons. By way of physical constraint and verification, this agreement would prevent Iran from creating fissile material for nuclear weaponry at its *declared* facilities for 10 to 15 years. This period would also allow for continued intelligence efforts to increase the likelihood of detecting any attempt at building secret facilities. However, most of the enforcement provisions of the JCPOA would expire after this time period, meaning that Iran could expand their capabilities and produce nuclear weapons at declared or undeclared facilities after the deal had expired (Samore et al., 2015, p. 4).

Proponents of the deal argued that advocates for nuclear weapons inside Iran would be undermined, stating that if Iran were to pursue the creation of nuclear weapons it would increase the risk of conflict with the U.S. and reduce economic integration and benefits. Opponents on the other hand were worried it could legitimise Iran's nuclear program, while not changing their hostility towards Israel and the U.S, and ultimately doing nothing to change their perception that nuclear weapons are necessary in order to defend itself and assert Islamic dominance in the Middle East (Samore et al., 2015, p. 8).

Supporters and critics differed greatly in opinion on the implications for Middle Eastern politics and regional security. By reducing Iran's chances of acquiring nuclear weapons, supporters argued it could improve the security of Israel, the Gulf states, and other states in the region. Another argument of support was that the integration of Iran's economy could strengthen the more moderate political factions in Iran, as well as increase opportunities for cooperation on issues where western and Iranian interests are aligned, such as fighting the Islamic State (Samore et al., 2015, pp. 11,12). Critics however, pointed out a troubling scenario, where leaving uranium enrichment infrastructure in Iran could potentially cause other Arab states to start seeking nuclear capabilities of their own, setting off a cascading nuclear competition in the region. Their other big concern was that access to frozen funds and the sanction relief offered in the JCPOA could give Iran greater opportunity to finance aggression and terrorism in the region (Samore et al., 2015, p. 12).

“The deal does not prevent Iran from building nuclear weapons and in some ways actually makes it easier for Iran to go nuclear in the future.” (Kroenig, 2018, p. 94) This is lifted from an article written just five months before Trump eventually withdrew from the JCPOA and shows clearly his motivations for doing so, in Trump’s eyes the nuclear deal was severely flawed from the start, as it allowed Iran to keep its nuclear infrastructure, something which all members of the UN Security Council agreed should be dismantled (Norell, 2015, p. 285).

The deal also weakened the two possible strategies the U.S. had to deal with Iran, in sanctions and military action. Iran signed the JCPOA in the first place because it feared economic sanctions and threats of military force, but the deal basically took both those options off the table, as the sanctions relief provided in the deal would make Iran more resistant to economic pressure in the future (Kroenig, 2018). Military action would also be difficult to justify if Iran were to comply with the JCPOA, run out the clock and acquire nuclear weapons after the deal expired. One can hardly justify bombing a country that has complied with the terms of an international agreement for over a decade. The military option was weakened further by the sanctions relief that allowed Iran to be better prepared for any hostilities (Kroenig, 2018, p. 95).

The JCPOA is a clear example of Obama’s focus on international multilateralism, cooperating with other nations on containing Iran and trying to curb their aggressive nuclear ambitions. However, it is also an example of defensive realism in action, as Obama was trying to maintain the status quo and appease both Israel and Iran in making this deal, giving assurances both to Netanyahu that military action would be used should sanctions and diplomacy fail, and to Iran as well that they would be allowed to keep their nuclear enrichment facilities and be relieved of substantial sanctions. This is where we now turn to Trump and will see a very different way of dealing with Iran and their international ambitions and destructive intentions towards Israel and the Sunni Gulf states.

4.2 America First

Donald J. Trump started his Presidency in a manner most people would expect given his election campaign, his insistence on putting American interests first, calling for NATO countries to pay their fair share (Holland & Wroughton, 2019), ambitions of revitalising the manufacturing workforce and reclaiming jobs from China (Mueller, 2020), the importance of a southern border wall (Morin, 2019), and reimagined trade deals (Swanson, 2019). In his inauguration speech on January 20th, 2017, Trump clearly states that going forward, foreign policy would benefit America first:

“From this day forward, a new vision will govern our land. From this moment on, it’s going to be America First. Every decision on trade, on taxes, on immigration, on foreign affairs, will be made to benefit American workers and American families.” (Trump, 2017).

This nationalist and protectionist, or as some would say, isolationist foreign policy is what mainly characterised Trump’s approach to international affairs and foreign relations during his presidency. For Trump, international agreements made under previous administrations mattered minimally, and what mattered in his eyes were how America could get back to its winning ways. This meant renegotiations of trade deals, withdrawals from deals such as the Iran nuclear deal and the Paris climate agreement.

This is also clearly showcased in Trump’s 2017 NSS, wherein he rejects his predecessors ideas for international relations, in Obama’s internationalism, Bush’s transformationalism, and Clinton and his embrace of globalisation (Ettinger, 2018). From the 2017 NSS we can read that Trump’s worldview is one of “principled realism” which has come from a new era of geopolitics, this principled realism is labelled as a strategy that is guided by outcomes, not ideology, and is based on a state-centric worldview that prioritizes a world of strong, sovereign, and independent nations (Ettinger, 2018).

The main conflict during Trump’s time in office was the threat of ISIS coupled with the rise of Iran as a major destabilising factor for regional security in the Middle East.

“For generations the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians has been understood as the prime irritant preventing peace and prosperity in the region. Today, the threats from jihadist terrorist organizations and the threat from Iran are creating the realization that Israel is not the cause of the region’s problems. States have increasingly found common interests with Israel in confronting common threats.” (National Security Strategy, 2017, p. 49)

This quote from the National Security Strategy (NSS) of December 2017, illustrates the point that at the start of Trump’s term, the Israel-Palestine conflict was not the chief concern of foreign policy output in relation to the Middle East, as it was no longer seen as the most pressing problem in the region. The rise of revisionist Iran and the growing threat of jihadist terrorism was at the time looked at as more important aspects of regional security in the Middle East. It also highlights how more states had come to understand that they had mutual interests in cooperating with Israel.

Already pointed out in the introduction is the view that Trump’s foreign policy was characterised by transactionalism, and in his view, the US should be willing to cut deals with

anyone that shares American interests, no matter how transactional such a deal might be, and regardless of whether they share American values or not. For instance, in the fight against radical Islam, Trump stated that any country that shared the goal of defeating ISIS was to be an ally. This meant a realignment with Russia, which at the time was a natural partner in the fight against Islamic terrorism (Kahl & Brands, 2017).

Another way in which Trump's doctrine was transactional was in regard to NATO and other US allies. He thought that they should "pay up" and was clear that they should be cut loose should they fail to do so. Early on in his presidency he also commented that NATO was obsolete which signals the fact that for Trump, alliances were not sacred commitments, and US relationships with allies should be conditional, not special. This point was made even clearer in his inaugural address, in which he claimed that Americas subsidising of other countries armies had allowed the depletion of the US military, implying America's alliances had weakened the country (Kahl & Brands, 2017). The way the Abraham Accords were negotiated reflects this transactionalism, as will be illustrated later on.

4.2.1 The Abraham Accords

The Abraham Accords are an umbrella term encompassing the deals made with the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Bahrain, Sudan, and Morocco during Trump's presidency. President Trump's historic peace deals with four Arab states and the Jewish state of Israel in late 2020 was an attempt at normalising foreign relations between Israel and several Arab states. The Abraham Accords gets its name from Abraham, the common patriarch for the three monotheistic religions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam (Singer, 2021). As stated in the Abraham Accords declaration document, this religious name and background is of great importance and carries a symbolic meaning of reconciliation between the three dominant religions in the Middle East: "We encourage efforts to promote interfaith and intercultural dialogue to advance a culture of peace among the three Abrahamic religions and all humanity." (Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs, 2020). The Accords mark the first real attempt at striking peace deals with Israel and Arab nations since the two peace treaties with Egypt in 1979 and Jordan in 1994 (Singer, 2021).

During the dying months of Trump's first term as President, the signing of the Abraham Accords took place in the White House, where the UAE agreed to the Treaty of Peace, Diplomatic Relations and Full Normalization between the UAE and the state of Israel. Cooperation in important areas such as agriculture, tourism, health, environment, energy, and innovation were put on the agenda, and seen as a way to improve development and prosperity

in both countries. Soon after, Bahrain joined the Abraham Accords, signing the Declaration of Peace, Cooperation, and Constructive Diplomatic and Friendly Relations (Yossef, 2021).

Following the signing of the peace treaties, the normalisation process started in October 2020, with the UAE signing seven normalisation agreements and Bahrain signing four (Singer, 2021). On the 23rd of October and 22nd of December 2020, Sudan and Morocco also agreed to normalise their relations with Israel, and all of these normalisation agreements are collectively referred to as the Abraham Accords (Singer, 2021; Yossef, 2021). Although the timing of the announcement of the Accords may have surprised many, it served as a formalisation of the progress in the bilateral relations between Israel and many of the Gulf states, and it also makes complete sense when thinking about their overlapping concerns regarding Iran, Islamic extremists and their shared uncertain future regarding US engagement in the Middle East (Yoel Guzansky & Marshall, 2020).

Critiques of the Abraham Accords of course mention the fact that it does not end any conflicts in the Middle East, seeing as all of the countries that entered into it were not at war with Israel in the first place, further expanding upon this point of criticism is that it could weaken the chances for a two-state solution with Israel and the Palestinian Authority. Another argument is the prospects of increasing Iranian aggression by encouraging more harsh policy choices by the UAE and Israel. However, in reality the focus should be more on what the Accords actually do accomplish, and that is preventing the escalation of many of the existing conflicts in the Middle East (Yossef, 2021).

The status quo powers in the Accords want to maintain the status quo in the region, seeking to preserve the established order, the way goods are distributed and upholding the current rules of the game, as they stand to benefit from it, in this case beneficiaries are Israel, Bahrain and the UAE (Wolfers, 1959; Yossef, 2021). The revisionist powers in the region, mainly Iran and Turkey want to impose a change on the established order and improve their position within or reorder the entire system to benefit them (Zionts, 2006). One of the most important incentives for the status quo states to make the Accords happen was the deterrence of revisionists and their ambitions of reshaping the region to their liking, this was even more crucial due to the US retreat from the region (Yossef, 2021).

The Abraham Accords have been called peace treaties; however, peace treaties are mainly tools that are intended to end a war between two enemy states, and the countries in the Abraham Accords have never been at war with Israel and they were not classified by Israel as enemies

prior to the Accords. This means that these normalisation agreements classified as peace treaties are fundamentally different from the two previous peace treaties with Egypt and Jordan, which were designated as enemy states by Israel prior to signing peace treaties in exchange for the land occupied by Israel after the six-day war in 1967, and ending the wars (Dazi-Héni, 2020; Singer, 2021). This practice of using the title of “peace treaty” for a normalisation agreement is most likely used to elevate their domestic political impact and importance, both for the American public, but also the populace of the signatories in the Accords. This is not new and is in fact quite common in normalisation agreements, for instance Chile and Argentina in 1984, Japan and China in 1978, and India and the Soviet Union in 1971 all used the words “Treaty of Peace” in their normalisation agreements (Singer, 2021).

4.3 Comparing Foreign Policy Approaches

The two deals are examples of different approaches to multilateralism in American foreign policy, what are the goals and participants of each, what are some domestic factors to consider in the creation of the two deals, and are there any differences in regional security cooperation based on the two deals?

As the goals and participants were identified in the introductory subchapters to the two deals, this section will begin with an overall comparison of Trump and Obama’s foreign policy and provide some insight into domestic politics to contextualise the two deals, before looking at differences in regional security cooperation.

Many would have thought that Trump and Obama, hailing from different political parties and possessing wildly different personalities, would represent foreign policy that was wildly different from each other, but they would be wrong. Trump’s “America first” doctrine was not a negation of Obama’s “Leading from behind”, the reason being geopolitics. Whereas Trump dismissed many advisors and could fire dissenters, he could not ignore the intricacies of geopolitical reality (Tierney, 2019).

The absence of a direct competitor is what mainly shapes American foreign policy in the post-Cold War era. With no compelling external threats like the World Wars or the Cold War, there tends to be domestic disunity and conflict, such as extreme economic inequality or the hyper-partisanship after the 90’s (Tierney, 2019). The American public tends to elect direct opposites of the previous president, case in point is this quote from Dominic Tierney:

“Obama and Trump’s opposing personal beliefs reflect a post-Cold War dynamic where Americans tend to elect a president who is the reverse of the last guy: the empathetic Clinton replaced the patrician Bush senior; the evangelical Bush junior replaced the lusty Clinton; the scholarly Obama replaced the C-student, Bush junior; the bombastic businessman Trump replaced the Ivory Tower Obama.” (Tierney, 2019).

Although most US presidents since the end of the Cold War have had vastly different personalities, US foreign policy has remained strikingly similar for a long time, with continuity remaining from Obama to Trump. As mentioned, this is due to geopolitics, and the main aspect to consider is the lack of a direct competitor after the Cold War. Trump was a classic post-Cold War president with a distaste for foreign alliances, an unorthodox, untraditional man of his time, governing a divided country (Tierney, 2019). However, Trump and Obama’s worldviews are not all that different, for instance, they both believed that most of the US’s interventions abroad were too costly and foolish, and that the US should focus on nation-building at home (Cohen, 2019). This is exemplified by Obama’s aversion to intervene in Syria, Trump’s withdrawal from Syria, and the way both presidents sought to draw down forces in Afghanistan.

Both Presidents had to keep geopolitics in mind when they formed their foreign policy towards the Middle East, and as illustrated earlier, the main issue in the region shifted from the Israel-Palestine conflict to the threat of Iran and the rise of the Islamic State during Obama’s time in office. When Trump took office, the main issue to deal with in the Middle East was ISIS and revisionist Iran (*National Security Strategy*, 2010; *National Security Strategy*, 2017).

Both offensive and defensive realism posits that states react to changes in the international system, and that foreign policy is a result of external systemic input. Reacting to international changes is exactly what Trump and Obama did in the creation of the JCPOA and the Abraham Accords, both meant to deal with the threat from Iran and both were multilateral deals in essence, but the JCPOA was a traditional multilateral deal in every sense, cooperating with the UNSC (including American adversaries in China and Russia), the EU, and Iran on a deal meant to bolster regional security in the Middle East, by preventing Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons ("Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action," 2015; Samore et al., 2015). Trump’s Abraham Accords, although they can be categorised as multilateral deals in accordance with the previous definition of multilateralism, had more bilateral aspects akin to the ‘Hub-and-Spoke’ system mentioned in the theory chapter (Izumikawa, 2020), especially considering the transactional negotiations from the US which will be discussed in the next subchapter.

As previously mentioned in the theory chapter, both the two-level game theory and neoclassical realism makes it clear that international relations and domestic politics have to be considered together when trying to explain international outcomes. The domestic political situations at the end of both presidents' terms can add some interesting context to the two international deals. Both presidents wanted foreign policy achievements to cement their presidential legacies and strengthen their historical image. As well as for Trump, increasing his chances at re-election in 2020 (Borger, 2020). The fact that Obama saw the end of his second term, and was not concerned with re-election, allowed him to make concessions to Iran about lifting sanctions and affording them the right to keep enrichment as a part of their nuclear program. These concessions also cemented the domestic support for the JCPOA in Iran, which helped the ratification of the deal (Hurst, 2016). As seen in two-level game theory, both governments and their domestic constituencies must be satisfied with the terms of the deal if an international agreement is to be successful.

Obama's JCPOA met a lot of opposition domestically, spearheaded by a powerful interest group in the American-Israeli Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC). Being sceptical of Obama's engagement strategy ever since the start of his time as President, AIPAC was constantly pressuring for the imposition of "crippling sanctions" on Iran in 2009 and 2010, which is not a surprise, as public opinion polling in the US saw American's identifying Iran as their number one enemy every year from 2006 to 2012, leading a State Department official to describe Iran as the "third rail" of American foreign policy (Hurst, 2016). The public opinion reflected great antipathy towards the Iranian regime and AIPAC vehemently tried to prevent the ratification of the JCPOA. The Republican House Speaker at the time, John Boehner invited Benjamin Netanyahu to address Congress, where he viciously criticised the proposed plan, calling it "a bad mistake of historic proportions" (Hurst, 2016, p. 555).

One of the opponents with the harshest criticism of the JCPOA was Senator Lindsey Graham, saying that the deal was akin to declaring war on Israel and the Sunni Arabs, his argument being that giving Iran, one of the world's biggest sponsors of terrorism, more room to fund extremist groups and belligerent activities in the region was dangerous and irresponsible, and could lead to a nuclear arms race in the Middle East (Rappeport, 2015). This sentiment was echoed by most Republicans leading up to the 2016 election, including Donald Trump saying: "Iran gets everything and loses nothing." (LoBianco & Tatum, 2015). Among other worries was one about legitimising the Iranian regime, and the fact that the deal did not include any point on them ceasing their terrorist activities (LoBianco & Tatum, 2015).

Criticism of the Accords mostly entail the fact that the Palestinians are basically ignored, which is a key conflict in the Middle East where Arab-Israeli tensions are among the highest and could negatively impact the expansion of the Abraham Accords in the future, with many Arab states still adhering to the 2002 API in which a two-state solution must be in place before normalisation with Israel can begin (Singer, 2021). There is also the fact that the Accords don't end any wars, but simply formalise relations with Israel and countries already cooperating with them, making the Accords 'low-hanging fruit'. A stark reminder that the Abraham Accords had not impacted the enmity of Israel's real enemies in Hamas, Hezbollah, and Iran, is the fact that during the signing of the documents in the Accords, six people in Israel were injured by rocket fire from the Gaza Strip (Borger, 2020).

The Abraham Accords formalised an already existing relationship, bringing diplomatic relations and diplomacy up from track two to track one, meaning Israel and the four signatories had cooperated on security in the past, informally and through backchannels, so one can argue that the deal does not change much in terms of security cooperation, but there is a stated wish to expand and enhance security cooperation, with the Gulf states set to benefit from Israeli technology and innovation, and both benefitting from enhanced intelligence and information sharing (Miller & Perkins, 2020). Whereas the JCPOA meant security cooperation of great powers outside the region in terms of the EU and the UNSC, the Abraham Accords seeks to increase security cooperation of regional powers, especially between Israel and the Gulf states.

While it is unlikely that we would see IDF forces in the Gulf, or UAE/Bahraini forces in the Mediterranean, what is more plausible is the presence of staff officers in each other's countries, which could be seen as building confidence and would allow for greater information exchange on mutually beneficial security issues. Another opportunity for enhanced security cooperation is the establishment of integrated missile defense architecture, early warning technology, protocols on information-sharing, and missile defense systems to safeguard national security in the cooperating countries. This is highly advanced and complex, and would require the US to participate as well as the signatories of the Accords (Miller & Perkins, 2020).

4.4 Normalisation, Geopolitics and Transactionalism

What are some factors that can explain why some Arab states have committed to normalise their relations with Israel, which incentives were provided by the US in the Accords, and are they a step in the right direction to releasing some tension in the region?

This section begins with detailing some geopolitical changes in the Middle East, and outlines some of the domestic situations and the motivations of the countries (especially Gulf states) entering the Accords and their interests in deciding to normalise relations with Israel, as well as the incentives and bargaining chips used by the Trump administration in order to get these countries to the table. This section will also outline where there can be potential risks attached to the Accords.

The US was the uncontested and dominant external power for about twenty years after the Cold War, and the Middle Eastern power dynamics remained quite stable during this time. Today however, as a result of a combination of the return of great power politics, with the rise of China and Russia, and the many revolutions and civil wars, the region has been through a dramatic transformation in the last ten years or so, changing the geopolitical landscape vastly (B. Jones, 2019).

There are many changes to the strategic geopolitical landscape in the Middle East that have happened since the turn of the millennia, the former ‘leader’ of the Arab world in Egypt has become poorer and lost its credibility as one of the most influential powers in the region. Iraq has been through many devastating wars with both external and internal enemies, with Iran, the US, and ISIS. Syria has experienced one of the most brutal civil wars in recent times, negatively impacting their economy and political stability drastically. These are among regional developments that opened the door for the countries in the GCC to try and fill the power void (Ferziger & Bahgat, 2020; Schatz, 2020).

Witnessed in the way Bush Senior did not hesitate to put boots on the ground in Kuwait during Iraq’s invasion in 1990, it was clear to see that US security policy in relation to the Persian Gulf, was to adhere to the Carter doctrine of protecting Gulf states against foreign aggression (Ferziger & Bahgat, 2020). Leading up to the Accords however, US statements and actions had raised some concerns among Gulf leaders. Many believing that, beginning with the invasion of Iraq, the US had shifted away from its role as defender of the regional status quo, to a challenger

of the state of affairs, which tilted the balance-of-power in Iran's favor. Several GCC states believe that toppling the Sunni regime in Baghdad helped Iran expand their sphere of influence and that it weakened other Sunni-Arab states (Ferziger & Bahgat, 2020).

A major realignment of international relations in the Middle East occurred in the wake of the "Arab Spring" in the early 2010's, as in 2017 Qatar and the GCC had a falling out. Qatar's continued support of the Muslim Brotherhood and other extremist groups saw the GCC isolate and boycott the country, as it had aligned with Turkey and Iran. Although the blockade was lifted in early 2021, the alignment still remains. This is in essence a rift between the normalisation opponents, in Iran, Turkey and Qatar, and the proponents in the UAE, Bahrain and Saudi Arabia to some extent. Erdogan's threat to close Turkey's embassy in Abu Dhabi after the Accords, is just one recent example of the forces driving the Gulf states closer to Israel (Ramani, 2021; Schatz, 2020).

Before the realisation of the Abraham Accords, the four signatories were involved informally with Israel in various ways. The reason why none of them had formalised their relations with Israel is mainly due to the 2002 API, led by Saudi-Arabia, which was an agreement by the 22 member states of the Arab League not to normalise their relations with Israel until they had reached a peace agreement with the Palestinians (Singer, 2021). This means that the four countries, UAE, Bahrain, Sudan and Morocco have basically broken their agreement with the Arab League, not wanting to wait for a conclusion to the Israel-Palestine conflict, but instead formalising their existing foreign relations, bringing both their relationship with Israel, and their opposition to Iran, to the forefront (Singer, 2021).

These are among the main reasons why Gulf states decided to normalise relations with Israel in the Abraham Accords, the perception that Israel could be a potential strategic partner for the GCC in countering their shared enemy in Iran, in terms of their nuclear, cyber, proxy, and missile programs (Ferziger & Bahgat, 2020). We will now see how the US went about negotiating with the signatories of the Accords. The US has a long history as a third-party mediator in brokering Israeli peace agreements, and has actively participated in all of them, from the end of the Yom Kippur War in 1973 to the Oslo Accords of 1993. Whenever talks have stalled between two parties, the US has stepped in and tried to "expand the pie", providing assurances to both parties, creating win-win situations (Singer, 2021).

4.4.1 The United Arab Emirates

The United Arab Emirates are the main attraction in the Abraham Accords, being the first country to sign a peace treaty or normalisation agreement with Israel since 1994. When going against the Arab League and breaking the agreement reached in the 2002 API, The Crown Prince of the UAE, Mohammed Bin Zayed (MBZ) must have believed that the potential upsides to normalisation outweighed the downsides, and the possible political backlash from the Emirati population (Yoel Guzansky & Marshall, 2020).

Public opinion polling in the UAE in the months prior to the Abraham Accords suggested that most people (73%) were more worried about domestic issues and wanted their government to focus more on internal reforms rather than on any foreign policy issue, this trend has been consistently found in polling results from previous years (Pollock & Katz, 2020). However, when asked about US involvement in the region, the Emirati public are pretty evenly split between increasing practical opposition to Iran and their influence and activities in the region (28%), and for the US to push harder to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict (27%) (Pollock & Katz, 2020). Public opinion on relations with Israel went against the UAE's current official policy of normalisation, with only 20% of people in agreement with this statement: "people who want to have business or sports contacts with Israelis should be allowed to do so." (Pollock & Katz, 2020). These polling numbers clearly show that most Emirati citizens were not on the same page as their government when it came to normalisation and cooperation with Israel prior to the Abraham Accords.

The story changes quite rapidly however, as in November of 2020 nearly half of the population saw the Abraham Accords as a positive change, and the number of people that agreed with the previous statement increased to 39%, nearly a doubling. It is believed that such a drastic change in public opinion is due to people "towing the party line" and responding in line with what the Emirati leadership is communicating about full normalisation with Israel, as self-censorship is likely a factor in these polls (Pollock & Cleveland, 2020). Additionally, it is not crazy to think that public opinion actually might have changed so drastically in such a short time, as business opportunities opened up, and sentiments towards Palestinian leadership dwindled further with only 30% viewing Hamas in a positive light, which is significantly lower than other Gulf nations (Pollock & Cleveland, 2020). There was massive potential for political backlash among the Emirati public, but as shown, most people care more about domestic political issues than

foreign policy, and after the UAE joined the Accords we can see that public opinion shifted to a more supportive tune towards Israel.

Although many are concerned about the Israel-Palestine conflict in terms of what the US's involvement in the area should entail, they are more concerned with Iran, which is reflected by the UAE's decision to normalise relations with Israel, putting their concerns for Iranian influence and aggressive regional activities at the top of the foreign policy agenda. Leadership in the UAE were not that concerned with the fact that the Abraham Accords basically ignored the Palestinians and has even claimed the Accords as a great diplomatic victory and a boon to the Palestinians' cause, in that it halted Israeli plans to apply sovereignty over more territories in the West Bank (Yoel Guzansky & Marshall, 2020). Yousef Al Otaiba, Ambassador of the UAE to the US stated: "If the Abraham Accords had not happened, we could not be talking about a potential two-state solution. I am being very blunt: I think we salvaged the two-state solution." ("The Abraham Accords One Year Later: Assessing the Impact and What Lies Ahead," 2021). The Ambassador also brought up a reminder that there were no concessions to the Palestinians in the peace treaties of Egypt and Jordan, claiming the Accords as the biggest concession the Palestinian cause has gotten in the last 25 years ("The Abraham Accords One Year Later: Assessing the Impact and What Lies Ahead," 2021).

Another reason why the UAE sought to join the Accords was MBZ's confidence that this deal would enhance the UAE's relationship with the US, leading to significantly increased security cooperation, due to the fact that this deal granted Trump a hugely needed foreign policy win prior to the 2020 election. The intentions behind the timing of MBZ and the UAE's recognition of Israel is therefore quite clear to see (Borger, 2020). However, mounting doubts among the Emirati leadership about continued US commitment to regional security was also among the explaining factors for this deal being realised, with the threat of Iran growing in importance and the acceleration of US withdrawal from the Middle East (Yoel Guzansky & Marshall, 2020).

As we have seen, part of the UAE's agreement with Israel to normalise relations hinged on the halting of further annexations of territories on the West Bank, but another part of the deal was also the guarantees from the US that the UAE would receive the advanced arms that they had been seeking. Prior to the signing of the Abraham Accords, the UAE had requested to purchase American weapon systems, which had been denied. Immediately following the signing of the Accords, the Trump administration notified Congress that they planned to sell fifty F-35 fighter jets and eighteen advanced military drones as a part of a broader arms deal worth \$23 billion

(Magid, 2021; Singer, 2021). Some worries about this transactional foreign policy is that it could further escalate and accelerate the ongoing arms race in the Middle East, as well as potentially weakening Israel's qualitative military edge (Yoel Guzansky & Marshall, 2020).

MBZ and the UAE's calculation for normalisation is fairly simple as there was really no significant downside to recognising Israel. Being completely safe in his domestic position it made a lot of sense for MBZ to leverage this deal for political gain. As for the possible foreign relations ramifications, the UAE were already in unfriendly relations with Qatar and Turkey, so any further vexations towards them would not matter a whole lot. Strengthening ties with Israel however, would be a great benefit, as they view them as long term strategic partners that could positively reinforce their long-term stability (Stephens & Stein, 2020). All in all, Israel and the UAE had growing relations for years prior to the Accords, and this deal is an admission of an already known truth, that the UAE and Israel see eye-to-eye on many different regional issues, not just their common enemy in Iran (Stephens & Stein, 2020).

4.4.2 Bahrain

The incentive that was used to make Bahrain join the Accords was among the least significant, as it entailed the declaration of a Bahraini Islamic resistance group (Saraya al-Mokhtar) as a terrorist organisation under US law (Singer, 2021).

After securing the deal with the UAE, getting the Kingdom of Bahrain to join the Abraham Accords was Israel and the US's next goal, as it is a small but strategically important island. Located between Qatar and Saudi Arabia it serves as host to the US Navy, the headquarters of the US Naval Forces Central Command, and a support base for the US Central Command. Despite the Shiite majority population, Bahrain can be firmly categorised in the status quo-alignment as they see eye-to-eye with Saudi Arabia, and most likely got the go-ahead from them to normalise their relations with Israel (Yoel Guzansky & Marshall, 2020).

In a similar fashion to the UAE, Bahrain has had close ties with Israel in the past, mostly cooperating in the security arena. Signalling a softening stance on Israel, Bahrain ended their boycott of Israel in 2005, and was the first country to openly support the normalisation between the UAE and Israel in 2020 but did not want to initially take steps towards normalisation themselves, stating an adherence to the ideals set by the Arab League in the 2002 API. However, in the following month they announced that they would join the Accords, most likely responding to US pressure (Yoel Guzansky & Marshall, 2020).

Bahrain is closely tied to Saudi Arabian policy, especially on regional issues, although on this particular issue of normalising relations with Israel they have more political flexibility than Saudi Arabia does. This is likely due to their small Jewish population that is recognised by the state, meaning Bahrain's state identity contrary to other Muslim majority states are more comfortable with Judaism, and the population of Bahrain are therefore more tolerant towards the idea of recognising and normalising relations with Israel. Even though there were some minor expressions of unhappiness with the decision, it did not evolve into a larger protest, letting the Kingdom of Bahrain get away with normalisation for a relatively low domestic cost (Stephens & Stein, 2020).

4.4.3 Sudan

The famous “Three No’s” reached by the Arab League in Sudan's capital of Khartoum in 1967 after the six-day war, was a proclamation of no peace with Israel, no recognition of Israel, and no negotiations with Israel. In a stunning turn of events, this at least symbolically, means that Sudan has made a complete about-face when it negotiated with, recognised, and made peace with Israel (Singer, 2021).

The case of Sudan is a tricky one, being a country with vast experience in knocking down military rulers through civilian protest, their leader for roughly three decades, Omar al-Bashir was ousted in 2019 after four months of continuous protests against their poor living standards and political repression. Although civilian protest led to his downfall, it was Bashir's own military that had him arrested and removed from office (Cross, 2019).

The situation in Sudan was made even more difficult by the military coup that happened in October 2021, which saw the arrest of Prime Minister Abdalla Hamdok and many others from his transitional government consisting of both civilians and military personnel. General Abdel-Fattah al-Burhan took charge of the country and is currently running it until an election scheduled to take place in July 2023 (Ghosh, 2020; Harshè, 2021). Before the signing of the Abraham Accords, there were concerns about the situation in Sudan over a possible repetition of the Israel-Lebanon peace agreement in 1983, which was signed by a Lebanese government without public support and fell apart in less than a year (P. Knopf & Feltman, 2020).

General Burhan addressed the country's state of affairs in February 2022 and not only acknowledged its existing cooperation with Israel, but in fact defended them, admitting however, that the foreign relations of Khartoum and Tel Aviv are a sensitive subject in the

country. He confirmed that the two countries were actively cooperating on security issues, stressing the importance for the security of Sudan and the region as a whole, as well as the importance for Khartoum's integration into the international community (Espanol, 2022).

Some commentary on Sudan's normalisation suggests the thawing of diplomatic relations came about as a direct consequence of pressure from Washington regarding Khartoum's removal from the US list of state sponsors of terrorism (Lanteigne, 2020), as well as the substantial economic and financial incentives on the table. Sudan was put on the list of states sponsoring terrorism after the embassy attacks in Nairobi and Dar es Salaam in 1998. The leader of the al-Qaida, Osama bin Laden, was taking refuge in Sudan and was directly involved with the attacks on the embassies, which killed two hundred and twenty-four people, including twelve Americans, and injured more than four thousand people. After the bombings, there were substantial sanctions and restrictions imposed on Sudan, not only from the US, but also from the EU. (Brakel, 2020; "East African Embassy Bombings,").

Among the sanctions imposed on Sudan was the one that prohibited American banks to do business there, similar to the sanctions on Iran, meaning Sudanese firms were unable to receive any outside investment and had no real way of participating in the global economy (Brakel, 2020). As Sudan joined the Accords, the US pledged \$81 million in additional foreign aid for the country, totalling over \$436 million for 2020, as the UAE and Saudi Arabia also pledged a substantial \$3 billion in humanitarian aid to Sudan during their time of intersecting crises in food security and economic downturns due to the coronavirus (The National, 2020).

Mentioned earlier was another key element in this deal, the removal of Sudan from the US government list of states sponsoring terrorism, which also ended many economic and other sanctions previously imposed on Sudan by the US and EU (Reuters Staff, 2021; Singer, 2021). Sudan's motivations for committing to a normalisation agreement with Israel is clear to see in terms of the immediate economic benefits that came from the removal of substantial sanctions, as well as their improved standing in the international community, with them no longer being listed as a state sponsoring terrorism. As part of the removal from the list, Sudan was required to pay \$355 million for the victims of the embassy bombings (Duster & Paget, 2020).

Although Sudan and Israel has a normalisation agreement at the ready, Sudan has still not signed it, with the Biden administration pushing for a resolution to this situation, the domestic political crisis in Sudan is holding up progress (Ravid, 2021). Sudan's Foreign Minister Mariam

Sadiq Al Mahdi stated that there are currently no plans to receive an Israeli embassy in Khartoum, despite both countries previously agreeing on opening diplomatic offices in each other's countries (Tárik, 2022). Again, we can see how domestic factors can impact international relations, with Sudan's internal struggles holding up their promised diplomatic activities with Israel.

4.4.4 Morocco

Morocco is home to the largest number of Jewish people in the Arab world and has therefore always been linked with Israel intrinsically, with over a million Israelis having direct roots to the country (Carlin, 2021). The Abraham Accords has allowed for more than just a cultural connection between the two countries. By formally establishing diplomatic ties with Israel for the first time, the agreement supports stronger bilateral cooperation both in cultural and commercial areas, signing new agreements on tourism and finance (Carlin, 2021).

The incentive used in the case of Morocco appears to be the most generous of them all, and the one that could have the greatest potential for negative outcomes. To get Morocco into the Abraham Accords, in December 2020, the US recognised Morocco's sovereignty over the entire western Sahara, which was viewed as disputed territory by many, the UN, EU and the African Union included (Magid, 2021; Singer, 2021). Shocking many observers, Trump broke with years of international consensus when he decided to recognise Morocco's claim to the disputed territory of Western Sahara, going against the UN's official designation of the territory as a "Non-Self-Governing Territory" (Stepansky, 2021).

Trump announced on twitter December 10, 2020, that he signed a proclamation which recognised Moroccan authority over the entire Western Sahara, stating that the only realistic option for lasting peace was to accept Morocco's proposal for sovereignty over the previously disputed territory. The Moroccan government presented the UN with a proposal for autonomy over this territory in 2007, which would grant some degree of self-governing to the Western Sahara in exchange for recognition that the land belonged to Morocco (Lanteigne, 2020).

Trump's recognition of Morocco's sovereignty over the Western Sahara is said to be: "[...] an astounding retreat from the principles of international law and diplomacy that the United States has espoused and respected for many years." (Baker III, 2020). The people of the Western Sahara have been in conflict with Morocco over that territory since 1975 after Spain's withdrawal, seeing control of the territory go to Morocco and Mauritania (Baker III, 2020). The

main adversary of Morocco that dispute their claim to sovereignty is called the Polisario Front, they declared the creation of the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic in 1976, demanding full independence of the territory. Mauritania withdrew from the territory after years of armed conflict in 1979, but Morocco continued to lay claim to the whole of Western Sahara (Lanteigne, 2020).

The prevailing view was that this move on Trump's part would only worsen the situation, making resolving the conflict even harder, and that it might also complicate US relations with Algeria, an important strategic partner (Baker III, 2020). Trump's move leaves the Biden administration with a difficult dilemma; renege on Trump's recognition, which could undo the normalisation process between Israel and Morocco, or confirm the US's recognition and risk worsening the situation in Western Sahara, potentially reigniting a long-dormant conflict in Africa which could see the resumption of fighting that could affect the border of Algeria and Mauritania (Lanteigne, 2020).

4.4.5 Dangers of Transactionalism

The Abraham Accords have great expectations behind them, mostly when it comes to positive outcomes related to economic prosperity and security cooperation. The risks, however, are not minor, and entail the diplomatic problem of ignoring the Palestinian issue, which could be a hindrance to further normalisation with other Arab states (Jordans & Batrawy, 2020), and the possibilities of resumed fighting and reignition of war in the Western Sahara (Lanteigne, 2020). There are also the dangers of an isolated and cornered Iran, where increased sanctions and pressure could force Tehran to make aggressive moves in order to safeguard their own security (Miller & Perkins, 2020). This last point is something we have seen in the literature of offensive realism, where revisionist states employ expansionist foreign policy as a way of ensuring survival in the international system, with the end goal being regional hegemony.

The Abraham Accords were tested for the first time in May 2021 with a reignition of the Israel-Palestine conflict, the eleven days of recurring war saw the governments of the UAE, Bahrain, Morocco, and Sudan face vocal discontent from their populations about the situation, blaming Israel and sympathising with the Palestinians over the events that occurred in Jerusalem and Sheikh Jarrah. The four states were under pressure to show solidarity with the Palestinians after they were accused of turning their backs on them after normalising relations with Israel (Y. Guzansky & Feierstein, 2021). An important factor in this particular event, was that Hamas and their involvement, provided the states tied to Israel with an escape. Shifting the focus from the

situation in Jerusalem to the conflict with Hamas and Israel allowed the countries to make more nuanced statements, not only were there basic reports of sympathy with Palestinians, but also coverage on the attacks of Israeli civilians and how they were forced to stay in shelters due to Hamas and their rain of rockets (Y. Guzansky & Feierstein, 2021).

Although the Arab world is mostly empathetic with Palestinians and their cause, they did not want Hamas, the Muslim Brotherhood, and by proxy, Iran, to emerge from this conflict with greater public support. This is especially true for the Arab countries involved with Israel in an official capacity. The fact that the conflict did not last very long, and ended when it did, probably allowed for the Abraham Accords to remain intact and not take any substantial damage from this debacle (Y. Guzansky & Feierstein, 2021). This has shown Arab states that acknowledgment of Israel does not mean you cannot support the Palestinians and feel sympathy for their cause, as it is possible to separate the two, both politically and emotionally (Stephens & Stein, 2020).

The situation in Morocco with US recognition of Western Sahara as Moroccan territory also have potential risks tied to it:

“By frenetically attempting to create a last-ditch American diplomatic achievement, and at times neglecting to connect necessary dots in the process, the Trump government may, on its way out the door, be setting in motion the re-emergence of a long-dormant unresolved conflict in Africa.” (Lanteigne, 2020).

This is an example of the overly transactional nature of Trump’s foreign policy and shows the dangers of transactionalism and not taking into account how one foreign policy decision that tries to spur on normalisation between Morocco and Israel can negatively impact the territory itself and the relations between Morocco and the inhabitants of Western Sahara and the Polasario Front, potentially reigniting a war and destabilising a large region that could affect much of the surrounding environment (Lanteigne, 2020). The Foreign Minister in Israel, Yair Lapid recently (March 2022) spoke out in favor of Morocco’s sovereignty over Western Sahara, issuing a statement that the countries work together to counter attempts that could weaken Moroccan sovereignty and territorial integrity (Rabinovitch, 2022).

A troubling scenario relating to the isolation of Iran, is that increased Israeli and Gulf security cooperation can significantly shift the balance of power in the region, as a UAE protected by Israeli anti-missile defense systems, operating advanced US/Israeli drones to aid their intelligence operations, and displaying vast aerial dominance through stealth technology, will

severely limit Iranian operations in the region, and could effectively halt Iranian proxy-war activity. Now, this is not a troubling scenario in itself, but Iran recognising their diminishing relative power means they would have no choice but to go nuclear (Norlen & Sinai, 2020).

We can clearly see the reasons for why these four Arab states decided to begin a normalisation process with Israel, all of the countries can expect vast economic benefit from the Accords, but especially Sudan as they now have access to the global market and is no longer bearing the heavy weight of being an international piranha on the US list of terror sponsors. The greater reason behind the countries' recognition and normalisation with Israel is their common enemy in Iran, seeing it as mutually beneficial for all of them to work together to counter Iranian aggression and activity in the region with enhanced security cooperation. And we cannot forget the fact that these countries, especially the Gulf states, had 'secret' ties with Israel to begin with, and formalising their relations was not viewed as a massive risk in relation to a domestic backlash.

In terms of incentives provided by the US, we can see that all of the countries received something in return for their commitment to normalisation, the UAE receiving advanced US weapon systems and a guarantee from Netanyahu that further areas on the West Bank would not be annexed, at least for the time being. Bahrain's incentive was decidedly the one of least significance, with Saraya al-Mokthar, an Islamist Bahraini resistance group being designated as a terrorist organisation under US law, Bahrain also joined in the halting of the annexation. Sudan's incentive was the removal from the US list of terror sponsors, along with massive economic benefit in terms of increased aid and removal of significant economic sanctions. Morocco's incentive was the greatest of all, at least in terms of political significance, with Trump recognising their sovereignty over the entire Western Sahara, which could have untold consequences in the region in the years to come.

Finally, are the Abraham Accords a step in the right direction? As illustrated, the deal is highly complex and consists of many moving parts and continuously changing circumstances, and the risks mentioned at the end paint a picture of a future where many situations have to be handled carefully, but overall, the positives do outweigh the negatives, simply the signal to other Arab nations that they can sever their political and emotional support for Palestine from their relations and cooperation with Israel is huge on its own. However, there are concerns about ignoring the Palestinian issue and how it could be a hindrance for further expansion of the

Accords. This question will be answered more thoroughly in the conclusion, after looking at the impacts of the Accords.

4.5 Power Dynamics and Regional Impacts

What do the Accords mean for the major players in the Middle East, as in Israel and powerful Arab states, such as Saudi-Arabia and Iran, what is the current course of action regarding the Accords under the Biden administration, and what does the future of the Middle Eastern political landscape look like?

This section will outline the impacts of the deals on the political landscape in the Middle East, mainly the impacts on Israel, Iran, and Saudi Arabia, it will also look into what the Biden administration is doing in the context of the Abraham Accords and detail some positive outcomes and expectations for future developments in the region based on the deals.

Israel's relations with Arab gulf states have been viewed from a perspective of a tacit security regime that has been based on shared political security and economic interests. The Accords made a significant impact on the regional level in several ways. The enlarged and deepened cooperation meant it consolidated the status quo alignment against the revisionist alignment in the Middle East (Yossef, 2021). The Accords also broke the Arab taboo of normalising relations with Israel and formalised Israel's membership in the status quo alignment. Israel also broke their own taboo of committing to the defense of another nation (Sandler, 2020). Israel has only been a de-facto member of the status quo alignment, shown through the peace treaties with Egypt and Jordan in 1979 and 1994, and the tacit cooperation with other Arab status quo partners, such as the Gulf States since the 90's. There is an optimistic expectation that this strengthening of the status quo alignment might push Iran and Turkey to change, or at the very least moderate their policies in the region (Yossef, 2021). In response to the UAE-Israel peace agreement Turkey and Iran both communicated strongly against it, as the deal would bring moderation and stability, and Iran benefits from chaos and unrest, the deal also undermines Turkey's expansionist policies towards Libya, Iraq and Syria (Al-Ketbi, 2020). Iran and Turkey has also claimed the deal is a "dagger in the back" of all Muslims and a betrayal of the Palestinian cause ("Iran, Turkey slam UAE over agreement with Israel," 2020).

The symbolic importance of the Abraham Accords is also very important, as it's painting the picture that the revisionists are losing ground. As already pointed out, explicit focus on development and prosperity through cooperation in various different civilian fields is the main

focus of the Accords. In the past there have been massive demonstrations whenever there was talk of normalisation with the state of Israel, yet the Accords have not received much popular criticism (Frisch, 2020), meaning the people of today's Middle East care more about improvements in living standards and better social services, welfare, education, healthcare, innovation, and greater economic opportunity etc. meaning the revisionist states are failing to provide people with their basic wants and needs, and losing support in the wider population (Yossef, 2021; Yossef & Cerami, 2015).

The Accords are a great demonstration of the *Gulfization* that has been happening in the Middle East, meaning the primary leadership of the Gulf parties and the priorities of Gulf issues taking the main stage in the Middle Eastern political landscape. This is clear to see in the reactions of the two previous countries to normalise their relationships with Israel, in Egypt and Jordan, both welcoming the Accords. Egypt hailed it as a historic step in the direction of peace, that could bring stability to the Middle East, but Jordan was more restrained in their official statements, feeling like they were pushed aside in their role as peace brokers between Israel and Palestine, as the UAE and Bahrain were credited with the postponement of further annexation by Israel in parts of the Palestinian territories (Yossef, 2021). A result of this increased Gulfization is the fact that Gulf issues take up more space in the Middle East and have become the main priority, like Saudi Arabia vs. Iran, the threat of Iran towards Arab Gulf states and the war in Yemen. Other problems in the Middle East like the Palestinian cause take the back-seat to these other issues. The Arab-Israeli conflict has basically been relegated to a second-tier issue (Yossef, 2021).

4.5.1 Israel

So far, the major winner in the Accords are Israel, seeing gains in their economy, benefitting strategically, and realising geopolitical advantages (Maital & Barzani, 2021). This section on Israel and their gains from the Abraham Accords will focus on three specific areas, firstly it will look at trade relations and economic gains, then improved diplomatic ties, and lastly, expanded security cooperation.

Israel is beginning to think of itself as a key player on the global stage after the realisation of the Abraham Accords and the normalisation of diplomatic, economic, security, and other ties with three Arab states (hopefully with Sudan as well) (Lynfield, 2022). The Accords have provided Israel with a rare opportunity to signal to the Arab world that peace pays off, hoping to capitalise on its enhanced standing in the Middle East. Israel's existence has been

characterised by hostile relations with almost the entire Arab world since its creation, and this is now Israel's first major opportunity to convince other Arab states that normalisation is a lucrative option (Lynfield, 2022).

The opening of the first overseas branch of the Abu Dhabi Investment Office in Israel signified the potential for vast economic benefit to come out of the Accords. The UAE announced in March 2021 the creation of a \$10 billion investment fund that would look to invest in many different sectors in Israel, including healthcare and agricultural technology, manufacturing, energy, and water (Tárik, 2022). Economic relations between Israel and Bahrain are currently developing and evolving, and it is estimated that over the coming years, trade potential between the two countries could reach hundreds of millions of dollars, According to the Israeli Foreign Trade administration (Tárik, 2022).

Part of the economic dimension is the increased tourism that is expected to happen in the coming years, Israel and Dubai already established direct flights by six different companies in November 2020, and more than sixty thousand Israelis have visited Dubai as tourists since then. Direct flights have also been established to Bahrain, but these have seen limited travel, most likely due to the coronavirus. Morocco with their cultural ties to Israel has always been on the map when it comes to tourism, but no direct flight existed until July 2021 in Marrakech (Tárik, 2022).

As for the diplomatic dimension, the Accords have brought with it the possibilities of real track one diplomacy between Israel and the four signatories of the Accords, whereas track two diplomacy has been a mainstay in the region for a long time, track one diplomacy, means Israel and the four Arab states now have a peacebuilding tool in official diplomacy where they can communicate on mutually beneficial issues (Kaye, 2007; Mapendere, 2006). Israel is set to benefit greatly from normalisation and increased diplomatic activity that could result in a warm peace with the four signatories, whereas previous peace treaties have not included normalisation, resulting in the cold peace we have seen with Egypt and Jordan.

In terms of security cooperation, Israel now has connections with four new Arab states and can expect cooperation with them on the main security issues that face the region, namely Iran and their proxies, chiefly concerned with Hamas in Gaza and Hezbollah in Lebanon (Borger, 2020). The security and defense cooperation already thrived between Israel and some Gulf states in the shadows, however it is likely to increase with the normalisation agreements, as an open

relationship means more room for intelligence sharing, as well as Gulf states benefitting from Israeli cyber-security and command-and-control systems (Norlen & Sinai, 2020).

4.5.2 The Islamic Republic of Iran

Iran has a long history of supporting terrorism, and the conflict between the US and Iran dates back to 1979 when 52 Americans were taken hostage at the American embassy in Tehran. Iranian support for terrorism and aggression in the region has been a major concern for the US ever since then, but the greatest concern was their developing nuclear capabilities. Although Iran claimed their nuclear program was peaceful, not many believed them and the Bush Administration tightened the economic sanctions that had been in place since 1979 (Cristol, 2018).

Obama pressed Iran further and strengthened the sanctions regime by convincing other countries to join in placing sanctions on Iran. Suffering under the heavy weight of the sanctions regime, and with many US troops directly bordering Iran in 2003, their perception that nuclear weaponry was necessary as a guarantor for their own security was very real. This changed however with the geopolitical situation looking completely different in less than a decade, and by 2015, due to US war fatigue combined with the sanctions that had become too much to bear, Iran was convinced to negotiate, resulting in the JCPOA (Cristol, 2018).

As previously discussed, the JCPOA ended many of the sanctions on Iran, and in the first six months following the implementation of the deal, Iran gained access to \$4.2 billion in assets and increased their earnings from export by over \$7 billion, with as much as \$100 billion expected to be recovered in overseas assets (Schwartz, Reddy, & Ghorashi, 2017). Iran saw many benefits from sanctions relief spread out across multiple sectors of the economy, but the sector that saw the largest benefit was the energy sector, with oil exports picking up to about four hundred thousand barrels per day (Schwartz et al., 2017).

One of the biggest losers in the context of the Abraham Accords is Iran, which two years prior to their signing, saw the reintroduction of a harsh American sanctions regime as Trump, much to Obama's dismay, ripped up his signature foreign policy achievement in the JCPOA on May 8, 2018 (Berenson, 2018; Mortlock, 2020). Releasing a statement calling it a "serious mistake" Obama broke with the age old tradition in which former presidents refrain from making comments on their successors. However, Obama had previously stated that he would weigh in on Trump's decisions when he felt American core values and interests were at stake (Dwyer,

2018; Lawler, 2018). Trump's main reasoning for withdrawing from the deal was the deal's expiration date and the failure to account for Iran's ballistic missile program, the US did not detect any evidence of Iran breaking with the provisions of the deal when withdrawing, and Iran remained in compliance with the deal for a full year after US withdrawal ("The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) at a Glance," 2022).

After his withdrawal from the JCPOA Trump's reimposed sanctions were part of his "maximum pressure" policy, designed to compel Iran to change its behaviour and deny them resources to engage in their aggressive destabilising activities in the region. He also promised however, that he was willing to make a new and lasting deal with Iran (Mortlock, 2020). To some extent Trump's maximum pressure policy did succeed, the establishment of an unprecedented sanctions regime prohibited almost all economic activity between the US and Iran, combined with the threat of secondary sanctions which discouraged other countries from engaging economically with Iran. This unquestionably denied the regime access to vital resources, which definitely cut off some support to terrorist groups in the region (Mortlock, 2020).

The withdrawal and reimplemented sanctions did not succeed in achieving the policy goals that Trump had envisioned, it did not change Iran's behaviour, and although it did limit their resources for destabilising activities, it did not stop them completely. The decision to withdraw from the JCPOA also fractured the unity in the UNSC and diminished the international political pressure on Iran to comply with the terms of the deal. Iran's regional activities continued, and they returned to ambitions of expanding their nuclear activities that were prohibited under the JCPOA (Mortlock, 2020).

Preventing Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons or gaining regional hegemony is vitally important for Israel and their new Sunni friends in the Persian Gulf, and the Abraham Accords brings with it enhanced security cooperation meant for exactly this purpose. Sunni Muslim countries feel threatened from within, as well as from without, both fearing the nuclear option as Israel is most concerned about, but also the possible uprisings from within, for instance Bahrain has a majority Shiite population. Eastern Saudi Arabia as well, where there are large oil fields, has a lot of Shiite Muslims (Tárik, 2022).

The Biden administration has tried to revive the JCPOA after Trump's withdrawal in May 2018 and has been in talks with Iran about lifting sanctions and reinstating the deal for over a year now, but the talks have stalled due to a dispute over the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps

(IRGC) and their designation as a foreign terrorist organisation, as well as sanctions on the organisation. Washington have been urged by several former diplomats to lift the sanctions on the IRGC and not let the opportunity to diffuse a nuclear crisis in the region slip through their fingers. Washington claims the designation and sanctions on the IRGC is unrelated to the nuclear deal, pointing to their long-term terrorist behaviour in Syria, Iraq and Lebanon (Wintour, 2022).

The former diplomats, including seven ex-UK foreign and defence ministers claim that Trump's withdrawal from the agreement is a strategic error that can be measured in the tons of enriched uranium that Iran has produced since, including near-weapons grade, the thousands of advanced centrifuges, and in the rapidly shrinking timeframe for breakout capability (Wintour, 2022). The White House claimed on the 26th of April 2022 that Iran were mere weeks away from obtaining sufficient fissile material for one nuclear bomb, but importantly clarifying that they were only referring to the breakout time, not the time to produce an actual nuclear weapon (Bose, 2022). It seems that offensive realism has got this case right, putting more pressure on a revisionist state and trying to isolate them further from the international society has led to a renewed perception in Iran that expansionist foreign policy and acquiring nuclear weapons are necessary in their quest for regional hegemony, and the previously painted scenario of increased Israeli-Gulf security- and defense cooperation forcing Iran to go nuclear is becoming visible.

4.5.3 Saudi Arabia

The prospects of Saudi Arabia joining the Abraham Accords are one of the most exciting things that could potentially happen in the future. A highly valued strategic goal for both the US and Israel is to bring them into the Abraham Accords, as Riyadh's entry into such a normalisation agreement, with their political, military, and economic capabilities would be a huge game-changer in the region (Lappin, 2022). One of the most crucial contemporary factors that have changed in the Middle East as of late is the apparent unwillingness by the US to be involved in the region, rather spending their resources and focusing their attention towards dealing with China and Russia, this was one of the central understandings that came out of a survey from the Tel Aviv-based Institute for National Security Studies (INSS) (Lappin, 2022).

The intention of disengaging from the Middle East was signalled both by the enthusiasm in Washington for reinstating the JCPOA, and by the withdrawal from Afghanistan in august of last year. The INSS pointed especially to the Afghanistan debacle as key proof that the US was no longer willing to commit much attention and resources in the region. A shared understanding

amongst Middle Eastern leaders that previously relied heavily on the US for support, is that they now have to prepare to deal with regional challenges and be responsible for their own security in the future (Lappin, 2022).

Prior to the Afghanistan withdrawal, Saudi Arabia had no intentions of joining the Abraham Accords, stating that Palestinian statehood was the best way to make peace in the Middle East. Now however, with the disinterest shown by the US to engage in Middle Eastern politics and conflicts, Riyadh might be more inclined to set aside their Palestinian ultimatum, fearing Iranian influence and expansion, as well as the possibility of Abu Dhabi overtaking them as the most important and influential power centre in the Gulf (Dazi-Héni, 2020).

The foreign minister of Saudi Arabia, Prince Faisal bin Farhan Al-Saud, cautiously welcomed the agreement between their close ally in the UAE and Israel to establish diplomatic relations and to exchange embassies. He said the deal could be viewed as positive, as it halted further annexation of West Bank territories by Israel, and was open to Saudi Arabia establishing the same kind of relations with Israel, on the condition that a peace agreement was reached between the Palestinians and Israel (Jordans & Batrawy, 2020).

Prior to the Abraham Accords, public opinion in Saudi Arabia on American foreign policy shows that 23% wanted the US to push for a two-state solution to the Israel-Palestine conflict, 31% were more concerned with containing Iran, 22% wanted to see diplomatic settlements in the wars in Yemen and Libya, while the remaining 18% wanted to safeguard the Syrian people (Pollock, 2020b). Compared with other countries in the Middle East, like Egypt, Jordan, and Lebanon, this priority towards the Palestinian cause is relatively low, but they are consistent with polling in Saudi Arabia in recent years. As for contact with Israelis, only 9% of Saudi Arabians responded positively to the idea of having business or sports contacts with them (Pollock, 2020b).

After the announcement of the Accords, the Saudi public was still divided, but increasingly more open to cooperation with Israel, with 41% backing the normalisation agreements with UAE and Bahrain, calling them a positive development. Additionally, 37% of people were positive to personal contacts with Israelis, which compared to the previous poll is nearly four times as many people who are now positive towards business and sports contacts with Israelis. This poll also reflected the long-term decline of the salience of the Palestinian issue among Saudi Arabians, a mere 11% of Saudis support Hamas in Gaza (Pollock, 2020a).

4.5.4 Positive Outcomes and Future Expectations

The most interesting future aspect of these Accords are the possibilities of Saudi Arabia joining, as it would be a huge gamechanger for regional security cooperation; with Israel, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and the US cooperating to safeguard security and ensure stability in the region. Not only is this exciting in a political and militaristic sense, but economically as well this could be of great benefit to all parties involved.

At the outset of the Accords, there were expectations that they could grow to eventually include as many as ten Muslim-majority nations. The Accords have been said to represent a major political breakthrough in the region, but they could also come to represent a new chapter of regional development: “away from conflict and toward a shared vision of economic prosperity.” (Egel et al., 2021, p. 1). Analysis done by the RAND corporation suggests that the economic benefits of these new relations could include the creation 150,000 new jobs in total for the four countries in the Accords, which could see that number climb all the way up to four million in a decade, with more than \$1 trillion in new economic activity, granted this outcome rests upon the expansion of the Accords to include at least eleven nations in total (Egel et al., 2021). In terms of economic prosperity, there is as we can see, vast potential. Making other Arab states realise this potential should be one of Israel’s greatest ambitions in the coming years.

In terms of realising future potential, the Abraham Accords have provided the US with a massive opportunity to act as a political and economic anchor, as the motivation behind the Accords is built on a mutual recognition that cooperation on economic and political issues is of vital importance for the vision of a positive shared future for Israel and its partners (Egel et al., 2021). However, much like in the development of post-war Europe, whether the Accords reach their full political or economic potential or not will depend on US involvement, in terms of financial and political support. Building on the Accords to incentivise their implementation would help support the previously mentioned process of generating roughly four million new jobs and \$1 trillion in new economic activity during the coming decade, which would address the crisis of around 25-percent youth-unemployment among many of Israel’s partners in the Accords (Egel et al., 2021).

In late March of 2022, Israel hosted a gathering of foreign ministers from Arab states in the country’s southern desert of Negev, in what is an unprecedented occurrence. The Negev Summit, as it has been dubbed, sent a message to the Middle East that Israel is a major coordinating force for international relations between Arab states. Foreign ministers from

Egypt, the UAE, Bahrain, and Morocco, met with the foreign minister of Israel in a meeting that can be said to be building upon the Abraham Accords of 2020 (Frantzman, 2022).

Early on after the signing of the Accords, there were many rumours about other Arab countries possibly joining, such as Saudi Arabia or Oman, however this turned out not to be true, at least for now. Although there were many concerns about the strength of the Abraham Accords, it does seem like it is holding up quite well today, even disregarding the fact that the Accords are yet to be expanded further. The Negev Summit can be said to be an indication of this, as Israel builds upon the Accords with further initiatives signed with Morocco, reaching out to Sudan, and forging stronger ties in the hopes of a warmer peace with Egypt (Frantzman, 2022).

The latest sign in warming relations between Israel and Egypt came late in March 2022, as talks between the two countries on strengthening trade and economic cooperation were had by the Minister of Trade and Industry, and the Minister of Planning from Egypt, with Israel's Minister of Economy and Industry. The discussions entailed plans to increase export capacity and activations of bilateral trade and investment capabilities, hoping that these measures would amount to a doubling of bilateral trade and reach a figure of around \$700 million in the next three years (Sabry, 2022).

The Biden administration is seeking to improve relations between Israel and the four signatories of the Accords, but also wish to expand the Accords with other Arab states. US Secretary Antony Blinken has said the US is looking for potential countries that want to join the agreement (Tárik, 2022). To do this, Biden needs to challenge the progressive wing of the Democrat Party that has been very critical of the Accords and seek to push Washington away from its traditional allies in the Middle East, particularly Israel, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE (Solomon, 2021).

Israel's Interior Minister Ayelet Shaked contends that if the Abraham Accords are to be expanded, the US will have to offer incentives to potential countries that might want to join the Accords (Magid, 2021). This view, in that the US was the party that was chiefly responsible for providing incentives to normalise relations with Israel, was not one that had been articulated publicly by such a senior member of the Israeli government:

“There's a lot of potential, but a lot is dependent on the [Biden] administration. In the end, these countries make peace, not only because they have an interest in making peace with Israel, but also because they have an interest [vis a vis] the US.” (Magid, 2021).

The Biden administration has not overturned the Accords and they are fully supportive of countries continuing to normalise relations with Israel, and as made clear by Shaked, the US will have to be responsible for providing incentives to countries that might want to join, seeing as they do so based on what they can see to gain from normalisation (Magid, 2021). In a discussion which brought together the Ambassadors of the Abraham Accord signatories, Bahrain's Ambassador to the US, Sheik Abdulla Bin Rashid Al Khalifa echoed this sentiment, stating that there needs to be a continuous commitment from the US to acknowledge and move forward with the Accords, regardless of who is currently in office. He believed this is a once-in-a-lifetime deal and expected a lot to be achieved in the coming years, but stressed that a trade-related multilateral approach to expand the Accords would keep the ball rolling and bring in more countries, which is one of the greatest goals of the Accords ("The Abraham Accords One Year Later: Assessing the Impact and What Lies Ahead," 2021).

Some reporting in late 2020 linked Israel to the conflict between Qatar and the Arab quartet (Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain, and Egypt), speculating that Qatar might join the Accords if the US put pressure on the quartet to end the boycott of Qatar. However, reaching such an agreement is seemingly impossible with the hostilities that exist between particularly Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Qatar. It would also require a diminished support of the Palestinian cause in Qatar, and as previously mentioned, although the blockade has been removed, the hostilities remain, and it is highly unlikely that Qatar joins the Accords in the foreseeable future (Michael & Guzansky, 2020).

With Trump out of office and the US pulling out of the Middle East, there have been signs of a positive change in the proxy war between Iran and Saudi Arabia, the conflict that has been at the center of the region's misery in recent years. According to reports the two countries are closer to re-establishing consular relations and negotiating for an end to the war in Yemen, where the two countries are backing opposing sides (Hussain, 2021).

The Abraham Accords have substantial implications for the major players in the Middle East, especially for Israel, Iran, and Saudi Arabia. Going through the situation for Iran reveals an economic roller-coaster ride of epic proportions, from suffering under the weight of American sanctions since the end of the seventies, being tightened by both Bush and Obama before getting three years of sanction relief in the form of the JCPOA, only to see the reimplementing of a harsh American sanctions regime under Trump. The Accords have as we have seen strengthened the status quo alignment against the revisionists, and this only serves to isolate

Iran further from the international community. This has led to renewed perceptions in Iran that developing nuclear capabilities ensures their survival in the international system, consistent with offensive realist theory.

Israel, being the major winner of the Accords, has seen normalisation yield great benefits in various different civilian and military areas, increased trade and tourism promises to have a massive economic impact not only for Israel, but all the four signatories of the Accords. Saudi Arabia has not yet been brought to the negotiating table and remain on the side-line, although some regional changes might suggest they could have an easier time joining the Accords in the future. The Abraham Accords have proven themselves to be lasting, at least in the UAE, Bahrain, and Morocco, with Sudan lagging behind. The reignition of hostilities between Israel and Hamas in May 2021 did not threaten the Accords, nor the relations between Israel and their newfound Sunni friends.

5.0 Summary and Conclusion

What does the contrast between the Abraham Accords and the Iran nuclear deal reveal about the differences in approach to multilateralism in security cooperation, which factors enabled the creation of the Accords, and what is their impact on the Middle East?

This thesis has explored the Iran nuclear deal and the Abraham Accords and their impact on Middle Eastern power dynamics, as well as how their contrast can highlight the differences and similarities of the foreign policies of Trump and Obama, their thoughts about power politics in the international system, and their approach to multilateral agreements. It has employed defensive and offensive realism as the two main theoretical perspectives to analyse and understand the two Presidents' foreign policies, as well as some important secondary theoretical approaches to account for domestic political factors and multilateral structure. The qualitative methodology of conducting a literature review allowed me to gain some key insight into Trump and Obama's foreign policies in the Middle East and their different approaches to multilateral agreements relating to security cooperation, how these agreements were created, and what impact they have had and will continue to have on the region.

Among contributions to the realist school of international relations theory is the way offensive realism seems to have got it right with regard to Iran, in the anarchic nature of the international system, Trump's zero-sum focus on maximising relative power through his "maximum pressure" policy and strengthening of Iran's main enemies through the Accords have seen them rethink their position in the international system, again seeing the need for expansionist foreign policy and nuclear capability to ensure their survival, which is the primacy of all states according to realism. Defensive realism posits that a balancing approach and increasing absolute security is the correct approach to dealing with the uncertain nature of anarchy, Obama's approach of "talking to the enemy" and engaging diplomatically with the help of international institutions might have changed Iran's behaviour in the long run, but this strategy ignores one of the core tenets of offensive realism, namely the fact that one cannot be sure of states' intentions. We can also see the security dilemma in action, where the increased security cooperation brought on by the Accords has made Iran accelerate their development of nuclear capabilities.

Another key contribution to international relations theory is how this thesis shows that both systemic and reductionist theories are useful to consider in the explanations of international

outcomes, specifically in multilateral agreements it has illustrated through two-level game theory and neoclassical realism, how domestic politics and international relations are interconnected, and how they can impact one another, great examples are Trump's re-election hopes, the end of Obama's second term allowing him to make concessions to Iran without fearing for his domestic popularity, the lessened domestic support of the Palestinian cause in the Arab states signing on to the Accords, and the case of Sudan and how their difficult domestic situation is currently holding up an international normalisation agreement.

International relations have also had major impacts on domestic politics, as witnessed by how sanctions on Iran and lessened US presence in the Middle East were among the reasons why Iran agreed to negotiate on the JCPOA, and the nuclear and terror threat from Iran is also the major factor in the realisation of both multilateral deals. This dynamic can also be easily spotted in the international behaviour of the Gulf states, where international factors such as US withdrawal from the Middle East, combined with the ever-present threat from Iran, forced them to consider their security situation more carefully and ultimately cooperate with Israel on their most pressing security issue in revisionist Iran.

Trump and Obamas approaches to the Middle Eastern problems were of a different sort, whereas Obama had to cooperate with American competitors internationally, both Russia and China in the UNSC, whilst negotiating with Iran on the JCPOA, Trump's Abraham Accords were very much a "made in America" kind of deal, emulating the hub-and-spoke approach of Southeast Asia, making sure the US and himself came away with a much needed foreign policy win ahead of the election. The JCPOA can be seen as a reflection of Obama's insistence on strengthening multilateral cooperation and international norms during his terms as president, whereas Trump's Abraham Accords reflect his zero-sum mindset and the transactional nature of his business-minded personality, where the deal strengthens the status quo alignment, it subsequently weakens the revisionist alignment.

The deals are not only reflections of the two Presidents personalities, but also serve to frame their general foreign policy doctrines very well, the JCPOA echoes Obama's "Leading from Behind" by focusing on burden-sharing and strengthening international institutions and norms. The Abraham Accords in turn reflect Trump's "America First", by placing the US firmly in a central negotiating position and making sure the US gains from the deal, while simultaneously showcasing its distrusting nature by foregoing negotiations with American adversaries and international institutions.

The cases studied show that different approaches to multilateralism in international agreements have their advantages and disadvantages, with Obama's traditional approach dispersing power among several actors, including two powerful international institutions. An advantage to this approach is the increased legitimacy by involving the EU and the UN in the JCPOA showing adherence to international norms. Trump's Abraham Accords however do not have to relate to the many complexities and red tape that come with involving international institutions. Also, the hub-and-spoke system deals with the main problem indirectly, not engaging with Iran at all makes for an easier time domestically as no concessions to one of America's greatest enemies is necessary to make the deal happen.

Other differences between these deals are the ways in which they tried to deal with Iranian aggression. Whereas Obama sought to negotiate and open a dialogue with Iran in order to halt their ambitions of developing nuclear weaponry, Trump's approach, in ripping up the JCPOA, reimposing harsh sanctions and putting in place the Abraham Accords, isolated Iran further and made them an even greater piranha in the international community. Both of these legacy-defining deals were ways to contain Iran and curb their continual regional aggressions, and through the perspectives of defensive and offensive realism, we can see that one approach was based on increasing absolute security and being careful not to upset the reigning status quo, whereas the other was founded on an offensive realist thought-process, in which gains in relative power is seen as the correct way to respond to threats in the international system. Increasing American, Israeli and Arab Gulf power at the cost of Turkey, Qatar, and mainly Iran and their proxies is very much indicative of this.

Trump's transactionalism and his business-minded personality is among the things that enabled the Abraham Accords to come to fruition. Without being willing to leverage incentives towards the countries that joined the Accords, they certainly would not have happened. Another factor that enabled the Accords is the way Israel and these states, especially Gulf states, have cooperated tacitly in the past. The claim that the Abraham Accords are a formalisation of already established relations is a popular one in the literature.

Another important factor is, as illustrated previously, the geopolitical changes that occurred in the Middle East and the continued US withdrawal under Biden, as well as shifting public opinion in the region about what the most concerning issue for regional security is, especially amongst the populace of the Gulf states. As the Palestinian cause slipped lower on the rungs of important issues, the window for normalisation with Israel gradually opened up as a possibility

for Gulf leaders to consider. Where in the past such actions towards Israel would be met with fierce uproar and demonstrations, today it seems most people are more worried about their domestic political situation and aggressions from Iran. Security cooperation with Israel can surely be seen as a way to lessen this threat.

The Abraham Accords impacted the Middle East in three main areas, economy, diplomacy, and security. As previously discussed, the economic aspect is probably the one of highest significance and importance regarding peacebuilding efforts in the region. Realising the economic benefits could signal to other Arab states that normalisation with Israel is highly profitable. A huge potential is that the increased economic activity can remedy the youth-unemployment crises of these countries. Hopefully the signatories of the Accords can act as frontrunners for other Arab states considering entering into a normalisation process with Israel, where they can circumvent the 2002 API and combine their support of Palestine with friendly relations towards Israel, which is now a possibility, as illustrated by the events of May 2021.

The diplomatic aspect has shown that track two diplomacy is common in the Middle East, informal cooperation between people and organisations to try and solve shared problems for mutual benefit, however these deals bring with it real track one diplomacy, which is the main tool for peacebuilding between states. The hope is for these ties to foster a warm peace between Israel and the four signatories, as earlier peace agreements have been of the cold sort. In terms of security cooperation, the Accords do bring with it potential for confidence-building between the nations through staff officer visits, but more importantly is the sharing of early warning technology and missile defense systems, as well as protocols for information-sharing and enhanced intelligence communications between the nations.

To conclude this thesis, I would say that the differences between Trump and Obama are less important than their similarities. They both sought to draw down US military presence in the Middle East, and they both multilaterally approached peacebuilding efforts in the Middle East, albeit from different perspectives. Whereas the JCPOA was a traditional multilateral agreement involving two of the biggest and most important international institutions on a deal to prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons, the Abraham Accords are a multilateral agreement with substantial bilateral aspects, seeing the US negotiating from a central position, formalising, and enhancing the bilateral relations between Israel and four Arab states, working on improving economic, diplomatic, and security ties.

For the Accords to reach their full potential it is vital to minimise the previously identified potential risks and capitalise on the potential benefits, and I personally hope that the Biden administration does not let this opportunity go to waste, that they are able to separate the Accords from their distaste of Trump and his ideology and realise their values. The Abraham Accords, although not perfect and lacking in some key diplomatic areas, are a great step in the right direction and can serve as a foundation for further normalisation, greater economic prosperity, increased diplomatic activity, and expanded security cooperation in the region, hopefully fostering a warm peace between Israel and more Arab states in the future.

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