

## STRATEGIC PRAGMATIST ANALYSIS OF SAUDI ARABIA AND THE UAE THROUGH DIPLOMATIC NORMALIZATION WITH ISRAEL

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**Abstrak.** Normalisasi diplomatik antara Uni Emirat Arab (UEA) dan Israel melalui *Abraham Accords* (2020) menandai dorongan pragmatis dalam kebijakan luar negeri negara-negara Teluk. Arab Saudi sendiri menunjukkan sinyal-sinyal mendekat kepada Israel, meskipun belum melakukan normalisasi penuh. Penelitian ini menggunakan teori Pragmatisme untuk menganalisis motivasi strategis Arab Saudi dan UEA dalam normalisasi terhadap Israel, dengan fokus pada aspek keamanan, keseimbangan kekuatan, dan keuntungan strategis jangka panjang. Metode penelitian bersifat kualitatif-komparatif melalui studi literatur akademik, analisis kebijakan, serta data opini publik terkini. Sebagai ilustrasi, survei Washington Institute menunjukkan dukungan publik terhadap normalisasi di negara Teluk (termasuk Saudi & UEA) merosot menjadi 19–25 % pada 2022, lalu lembaga INSS mencatat bahwa resistensi publik Saudi terhadap normalisasi cukup signifikan pasca perang Gaza, dimana perspektif keagamaan dan pro-Palestina tetap dominan. Hasil penelitian ini menunjukkan bahwa normalisasi bukan semata poros ekonomi atau diplomasi simbolik, melainkan bagian dari kalkulasi rasional negara untuk memperkuat posisi keamanan dan diplomatik di tengah kompetisi regional. Implikasi penelitian ini menyentuh bagaimana negara Arab “bergerak pragmatis” dalam sistem internasional yang anarkis dan bagaimana batas domestik (opini publik, legitimasi agama) mempengaruhi pilihan normalisasi.

**Kata Kunci:** Pragmatisme, Normalisasi Diplomatik, Arab Saudi, UEA, Keamanan Regional.

**Abstract.** The diplomatic normalization between the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Israel through the *Abraham Accords* (2020) marks a pragmatic shift in the foreign policy of Gulf states. Saudi Arabia itself has shown signals of moving closer to Israel, although it has not yet pursued full normalization. This research applies the theory of Pragmatism to analyze the strategic motivations of Saudi Arabia and the UAE in normalizing relations with Israel, focusing on aspects of security, balance of power, and long-term strategic benefits. The research method is qualitative-comparative, utilizing academic literature review, policy analysis, and recent public opinion data. For illustration, a survey by the Washington Institute shows that public support for normalization in Gulf states (including Saudi Arabia and the UAE) declined to 19–25% in 2022. Moreover, data from the INSS indicates that public resistance in Saudi Arabia to normalization remains significant after the Gaza war, where religious perspectives and pro-Palestinian sentiment continue to be dominant. The findings of this research indicate that normalization is not merely an economic axis or symbolic diplomacy, but part of a rational state calculation to strengthen security and diplomatic positioning amid regional competition. The implications of this study highlight how Arab states “act pragmatically” within an anarchic international system, and how domestic boundaries (public opinion, religious legitimacy) influence normalization choices.

**Keywords:** Pragmatism, Diplomatic Normalization, Saudi Arabia, UAE, Regional Security.

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## INTRODUCTION

The Arab–Israeli armed conflict began in 1948 and has persisted continuously. The conflict has also given rise to several major wars, including the 1948 Arab–Israeli War, the Six-Day War in 1967, and the Yom Kippur War in 1973 (Hakiem et al., 2023). A similar situation occurred during the 1967 war and the Yom Kippur War, in which Israel consistently emerged with favorable outcomes, namely the expansion of its territory following these conflicts. On this basis, the Arab states decided to refrain from establishing diplomatic relations with Israel, a stance formalized at the Arab Summit in Khartoum in 1967 (Wardoyo & Valentino, 2022). The normalization of diplomatic relations between the Arab Gulf states and Israel marks a significant shift in the geopolitical dynamics of the Middle East (Baqi, 2022).

The United States plays a crucial role as the primary mediator in the normalization process between the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Saudi Arabia, and Israel. In the journal *Breaking Taboo* by (Wardoyo & Valentino, 2022), it is explained that the administration of Donald Trump actively promoted the establishment of the Abraham Accords in 2020 as part of its foreign policy in the Middle East. The signing of the Abraham Accords in 2020 by the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Bahrain, mediated by the United States, opened a new chapter in Arab–Israeli relations after decades of diplomatic tension (The Abraham Accords, 2020). The UAE became the first Arab state in the past two decades to establish official relations with Israel without waiting for the resolution of the Palestinian conflict, thereby signaling the emergence of a new, more pragmatic paradigm in the foreign policy of the Gulf region.

This decision demonstrates that national interests grounded in security and economic considerations are now prioritized over ideological solidarity with the Palestinian cause. For the UAE, cooperation with Israel offers significant opportunities in the fields of technology, defense, and the digital economy (Muhamad, 2020). Data from the Israel Export Institute (2023) indicates that trade between the UAE and Israel reached more than US \$2.5 billion in the first year following the signing of the Abraham Accords, representing an nearly threefold increase compared to the period prior to the agreement (Joffre, 2022). This underscores that the UAE views normalization as a strategic instrument to strengthen national competitiveness and to expand access to high-technology sectors and foreign investment.

Meanwhile, Saudi Arabia has pursued a more cautious diplomatic approach. Although Riyadh has not officially normalized relations with Israel, its involvement in various diplomatic dialogues cannot be overlooked. This cautious stance is driven by the fact that openly normalizing relations would risk positioning Saudi Arabia as an adversary among other Arab states, particularly in the eyes of Iran (Utami & Basyar, 2022). Saudi Arabia has engaged in closed-door discussions with Israeli and United States officials regarding the possibility of normalization, in exchange for security guarantees from Washington, as well as permission to develop civilian nuclear technology and improved access to advanced military weaponry in the future (Noël, 2020). Although Saudi Arabia remains ambivalent, this approach reflects a form of strategic pragmatism, in which the Kingdom seeks to balance domestic interests, pro-Palestinian public sentiment, and broader regional geopolitical considerations. Internally, the prospect of normalization is closely linked to Saudi Arabia's modernization and economic transformation agenda outlined in Vision 2030, a strategy aimed at diversifying the economy, reducing dependence on oil, and expanding foreign

investment. In this context, opening relations with Israel is seen as a means to accelerate Saudi access to technological innovation, particularly in the sectors of renewable energy and cybersecurity (Soliman, 2021). Thus, this seemingly pragmatic foreign policy in fact represents a rational strategy aimed at maintaining economic stability and national security amid intensifying global competition.

One of the most controversial aspects of the normalization of relations between the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Israel is the fact that it was undertaken without any tangible resolution to the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. This policy is viewed as a new form of pragmatism in the Middle East, wherein Arab states have begun to prioritize their national interests over ideological solidarity with the Palestinian cause (Tahmi et al., 2022). The UAE considers that direct engagement with Israel may afford it greater influence in regional diplomacy, although this decision has generated criticism among segments of the Arab public who view it as a betrayal of the Palestinian cause.

However, these dynamics are not free from public resistance. Only a small proportion of Saudi and Emirati citizens have expressed support for diplomatic normalization with Israel. This negative sentiment has intensified further following the 2023 Gaza war (Rosas, 2024). A larger portion of Saudi citizens strongly rejects the prospect of normalization, indicating a significant gap between the pragmatic calculations of the political elite and the ideological values held by the broader society. Beyond economic factors and public opinion, regional security considerations also serve as a primary driver of this pragmatism. Both the UAE and Saudi Arabia view Iran as a strategic threat to regional stability. Israel, which likewise maintains deep-seated rivalry with Iran, thus emerges as a potential partner in constructing a balance of power in the region (Wicaksono, 2020). Within the framework of Realist theory, this action can be understood as an effort by states to preserve their existence and safeguard their interests within an anarchic international system, in which power and security constitute the highest priorities (Walt, 1987).

Thus, the strategic pragmatism demonstrated by the UAE and Saudi Arabia through their diplomatic initiatives toward Israel reflects a shifting paradigm in the foreign policy of the Arab world. These states are now more oriented toward political rationality and national interests rather than traditional ideological solidarity. Therefore, this research will analyze these developments through the perspective of Realism, in order to illustrate that diplomatic normalization constitutes a strategic instrument for strengthening state positions within an evolving regional and global security architecture.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

In the context of international relations, pragmatism has emerged as one of the most prominent approaches to understanding a state's orientation and behavior in shaping foreign policy. Pragmatism generally refers to an approach that emphasizes concrete national interests, measurable outcomes, and the flexibility of diplomatic strategies and tactics in responding to changes in the global environment. Pragmatism in foreign policy is not merely a form of “soft realism,” but rather a way of thinking that views political action as a process of seeking practical solutions to real-world problems in an ever-changing international system. This approach differs from normative idealism in that it is not bound by fixed values or ideologies, but instead focuses on effective and adaptive results within specific contexts (Ralph & Gaskarth, 2025).

Velazquez (2022) introduces the concept of principled pragmatism, a blend of strategic interests and certain value-based considerations often adopted by developing countries to balance international legitimacy with practical needs. In this context, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) demonstrate a similar pattern: both continue to express support for the Palestinian cause while simultaneously seeking to establish diplomatic relations with Israel as a means to gain economic, technological, and security advantages. This reflects a form of pragmatism that is not entirely transactional but rather based on an adaptive strategy that takes into account domestic pressures and external opportunities.

Pragmatism in international politics emphasizes the importance of processes and inter-state relations rather than static structures. This means that foreign policy decisions are viewed as the result of a series of contextual considerations rather than merely reflections of power-based theories. Within this framework, the diplomatic normalization between Israel and Gulf states such as the UAE, as well as the prospective normalization by Saudi Arabia, can be understood as adaptive strategies rooted in the need to maintain regional stability, counterbalance Iran's influence, and secure defense technology support from Western partners (Vakil & Quilliam, 2023).

The framework of diplomatic pragmatism provides a strong analytical lens to understand how and why Saudi Arabia and the UAE pursue diplomatic normalization with Israel. Their actions are not driven by ideology but by rational calculations of long-term economic, technological, and security interests. In the case of the UAE, this approach is more explicit through the Abraham Accords of 2020, which opened extensive cooperation in the fields of energy, security, and technological innovation (Vakil & Quilliam, 2023). In contrast, Saudi Arabia exhibits a more subtle form of pragmatism by maintaining informal communication channels, supporting regional stability, while continuing to emphasize its commitment to the two-state solution for Palestine.

## RESEARCH METHODS

This research employs a qualitative approach with a comparative case study method as a means to analyze the forms of pragmatic foreign policy strategies of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) in their processes of diplomatic normalization with Israel. According to Yin (Yin, 2018), the comparative case study method is suitable for understanding contemporary phenomena within real-life contexts and allows for an in-depth analysis of the strategic differences between actors. Data were collected through literature studies, including official policy documents, diplomatic statements, the Abraham Accords (2020), reports from international organizations, academic journals, and credible media articles.

This research utilizes FPA (Foreign Policy Analysis) (Hudson, 2005) and content analysis methods to identify strategic motives, political narratives, and national interests in the process of diplomatic normalization. Furthermore, thematic comparison techniques are employed to assess the similarities and differences in the patterns of Saudi and UAE pragmatism, particularly in terms of economic, security, geopolitical, and domestic dynamics. Data validity is strengthened through source triangulation and cross-verification between primary data (such as official documents) and secondary data from academic literature and expert analyses.

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The diplomatic normalisation undertaken by the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and similar signals from Saudi Arabia towards Israel mark a significant turning point in Middle Eastern geopolitics, a shift driven by deep strategic pragmatism. This analysis shows that the decisions of these Gulf states are based on careful calculations of real national interests, which now transcend traditional ideological sentiments regarding the Palestinian issue. These interests are encapsulated in three main pillars: ambitious economic diversification through high-tech collaboration (as seen in Saudi Vision 2030 and the UAE's economic transformation), enhanced regional security in the face of shared threats from Iran, and efforts to gain strategic political and military support from the United States. Thus, normalisation is not merely a temporary diplomatic move, but a long-term adaptation strategy to strengthen the domestic and international positions of both countries amid an increasingly multipolar global order and domestic demands for modernisation.

Although driven by similar motivations, the implementation of pragmatism by the UAE and Saudi Arabia shows striking differences, which greatly affect regional dynamics. The UAE appears as a proactive and bold actor (*action-first*) in pursuing the concrete benefits of the Abraham Accords, explicitly taking advantage of investment and technology opportunities and enhancing its moderate image in the eyes of the world. On the other hand, Saudi Arabia applies a more cautious (*stability-first*) pragmatism, weighing domestic sensitivities and its symbolic role as guardian of Islam's two holy cities before taking formal steps. Regionally, these normalisation steps have triggered an alliance reconfiguration in the Middle East, cementing a new anti-Iran-oriented bloc and creating a strong trilateral (Arab-Israel-US) cooperation channel. However, this also has the potential to cause fragmentation within the Arab League, highlighting how national interests have replaced pan-Arabism as the main determinant of foreign policy in the region.

### Strategic Motivation for Normalisation

The decision by the United Arab Emirates (UAE) to explicitly normalise relations, and Saudi Arabia's similar inclination, are based on complex strategic calculations. Normalisation is seen not as an end in itself, but as a pragmatic instrument for achieving greater national goals, primarily in three crucial areas: economics, security and politics. This fundamental shift indicates that Gulf states have shifted their focus from historical solidarity to a new geopolitical reality. In this regard, Arab states that have normalised relations assume that what they are doing is a rational choice in light of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and their current national interests (Rimapradesi & Sahide, 2021). This rational choice then underpinned the following specific motivations, mainly because their interests are now dominated by security and economic concerns for their country (Rimapradesi & Sahide, 2021).

#### 1. Economy: Diversification and Technological Cooperation

One of the main reasons the UAE and Saudi Arabia have opened up to Israel is economic necessity, particularly in order to diversify away from dependence on oil. The UAE sees normalisation as an opportunity to expand cooperation in the fields of investment, technology and innovation. Israel has superior capabilities in the high-tech and cyber security sectors, which can help the UAE accelerate its economic transformation towards a knowledge-based industry. This is in line with the UAE's long-term development vision, which emphasises a green and digital economy as key pillars.

Following the signing of the Abraham Accords in 2020, the UAE and Israel immediately signed trade and investment agreements in the fields of energy, modern agriculture and defence technology development.

For Saudi Arabia, similar economic motives are evident in Vision 2030, which focuses on developing the non-oil and tourism sectors. Although Saudi Arabia has not yet officially normalised relations, economic measures such as the opening of indirect business channels and economic dialogue indicate a similar policy direction. Economic pragmatism is encouraging Gulf states to place national interests above ideological sentiments (Wardoyo & Valentino, 2022). In this context, normalisation is understood as an instrument to strengthen economic competitiveness, attract global investment, and expand strategic cooperation networks amid economic uncertainty in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic.

## **2. Security: The Iranian Threat and Defence Cooperation**

Security factors were an important reason behind the UAE's decision to establish diplomatic relations with Israel. In a study (Wardoyo & Valentino, 2022), it was explained that the UAE views Iran as the main threat to regional stability, particularly due to Iran's nuclear development programme and its support for militia groups in the Middle East. Until now, the presence of the United States military in the region has served as a counterbalance to Iran's power, but as US attention in the Middle East has waned, the UAE has sought a new partner that shares its perception of the threat — namely, Israel. Through this alliance, the UAE hopes to strengthen its defence position and gain access to Israel's modern military technology. (Tahmi et al., 2022) adding that security and defence cooperation between the UAE and Israel is of 'vital' urgency. Normalisation allows the two countries to exchange intelligence and conduct joint military exercises, as well as opening up opportunities for the UAE to obtain military assistance from the United States, including F-35 fighter jets and other advanced defence systems. This move demonstrates the UAE's strategy, which is not only economically oriented but also focused on enhancing long-term security capabilities in the face of potential regional threats.

From a broader perspective, Saudi Arabia also has similar security interests, although it has not taken formal steps like the UAE. Threats from Iran, particularly in Yemen and the Persian Gulf, have led Riyadh to establish unofficial communication with Israel for intelligence coordination (Suryana & Nugraha, 2020). This shows that both Saudi Arabia and the UAE practise realistic pragmatism in their foreign policy, where national security takes precedence over ideological solidarity on the Palestinian issue. Thus, the normalisation of diplomatic relations is understood as a survival strategy in the context of the balance of power in the Middle East.

## **3. Politics: Support from the United States and Increased Global Status**

Politically speaking, the normalisation of relations with Israel cannot be separated from the significant role played by the United States as the main mediator. Donald Trump's administration actively promoted the Abraham Accords as part of its global diplomatic strategy, and the UAE became the first Gulf country to respond positively to the initiative. The UAE's move was driven by its desire to strengthen strategic relations with the US while enhancing its image as a moderate and modern Arab country (Wardoyo & Valentino, 2022). Political support from Washington not only provides

international legitimacy, but also opens up access to broader economic and military cooperation. Thus, normalisation is seen as a way to strengthen the UAE's diplomatic position amid global political dynamics.

Regionally, normalisation is also an instrument for expanding political influence in the Gulf region. The UAE is using this step to present itself as a mediator between the West and the Arab world, strengthening its role as a proactive diplomatic actor. (Hakiem et al., 2023) explains that this strategy helps the UAE expand its alliances and strengthen internal political stability. Meanwhile, Saudi Arabia tends to be more cautious as it still considers domestic sensitivities and solidarity with Palestine. Even so, the direction of Riyadh's foreign policy shows a similar tendency: establishing relations with major powers in order to maintain stability and expand global influence. Thus, political pragmatism is an important foundation in both countries' decisions to adapt to an increasingly multipolar international order.

### The Role Of United States

Through intensive diplomacy, the US sought to link Israel's security interests with the economic ambitions of the Gulf states. The UAE became the first Gulf state to respond positively to this effort, seeing US support as a guarantee of political and security stability. In addition to acting as a mediator, the US also served as a guarantor of the agreement and a balancing force in the region to ensure that the normalisation process did not create new tensions among other Arab states.



**Figure 1.** Signing of the Abraham Accords at the White House, 15 September 2020  
(Source: The White House, 2020)

In addition to acting as a diplomatic mediator, the United States also provides various economic and military incentives to countries willing to normalise relations with Israel. In research (Putra et al., 2024; Tahmi et al., 2022), It was explained that the US offered an economic and defence cooperation package to the UAE, including access to F-35 stealth fighter jets and other advanced military technology. These incentives were intended to strengthen the UAE's position in the Gulf region while reaffirming Israel's role as a key strategic ally of the US. For Saudi Arabia, although it has not yet signed a similar agreement, the US is also providing diplomatic encouragement and security guarantees, including through defence cooperation forums and high-level economic consultations. This strategy shows that Washington is using a carrot and stick approach,

offering material benefits while gently pressuring Gulf countries to align themselves with US geopolitical interests.

Furthermore, US diplomatic pressure is not only focused on security issues, but is also directed at establishing a new political order in the Middle East that is more stable and pro-Western. The US sees normalisation as a way to form an anti-Iran political bloc and reduce the Gulf states' dependence on non-Western powers such as Russia and China (Hakiem et al., 2023; Nasrullah & Hidayat, 2021). By facilitating Israeli-Arab relations, the US is strengthening its network of influence in the region while improving its diplomatic image following controversial military interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan. In this context, the pragmatism of the UAE and the caution of Saudi Arabia are actually in line with US global strategy: using diplomatic normalisation as a means of maintaining the balance of power and ensuring American dominance in the Middle East.

### **Comparison of Saudi Pragmatism vs UAE Pragmatism**

The UAE has emerged as an actor that, although not as large as Saudi Arabia in terms of territory or traditional influence, is very ambitious in pursuing normalisation diplomacy with Israel. Based on an analysis of the UAE's national interests in normalising relations with Israel, the UAE responded quickly to opportunities after the Abraham Accords, undertaking investment initiatives, technological cooperation and relatively open diplomatic exchanges (Tahmi et al., 2022). The UAE is not as burdened by heavy domestic pressure regarding legitimacy on the Palestinian issue as Saudi Arabia is, allowing it to take more advanced and explicit diplomatic steps.

The UAE is more proactive in pursuing the benefits of pragmatism in practical terms. The acceleration of cooperation projects in the fields of trade, tourism, security and technology demonstrates an 'action-first' approach, which is not only rhetorical but also realised on the ground. An example of this is the signing of several MoUs after the Accords, which immediately activated investment and business delegation visits. The Indonesian Government Policy Journal related to diplomacy in the Middle East (Study of United Arab Emirates-Israel Relations in 2024) states that the normalisation of UAE-Israel relations also creates a positive atmosphere for diplomatic and economic cooperation in Southeast Asia, which shows that the UAE's proactivity has an impact not only regionally but also internationally. The UAE's modest ambitions are also reflected in its flexibility to normalise relations while maintaining several symbolic positions regarding Palestine.

The UAE continues to use public diplomacy and the media to affirm its support for a two-state solution and Palestinian rights as part of its international moral legitimacy. However, in its foreign policy practice, the UAE balances public moral demands and practical national needs, making pragmatism an important component of its foreign policy strategy. With this approach, the UAE has succeeded in gaining support from Western countries and the US and has obtained concrete benefits in the form of investment and confirmation of its role as a mediator and regional centre.

A country with a significant symbolic and historical position in the Arab and Islamic world, Saudi Arabia faces more complex domestic challenges than the UAE in terms of normalisation. Saudi Arabia must consider Arab and Muslim public opinion, which remains strongly supportive of Palestinian solidarity, as well as its religious role and symbolic leadership as guardian of the two holy cities (Mecca and Medina). This has led Saudi Arabia to move more cautiously, taking a gradual approach and maintaining a

balance between diplomatic signals to the outside world and domestic commitments to the Palestinian issue. Saudi Arabia has not explicitly signed an agreement similar to the Abraham Accords, although there has been a shift in rhetoric and indirect diplomatic contacts (Tahmi et al., 2022).

Saudi Arabia appears to be adopting a more cautious pragmatic strategy, waiting for sufficiently strong conditions and incentives to act. Saudi Arabia pays attention to internal legitimacy, including political support, public opinion, and their ideological legacy before taking any major steps. For example, Saudi Arabia is more sensitive to domestic reactions if its actions are considered to be ‘betraying’ Palestine or too hasty without clear security guarantees and economic benefits. In this case, Saudi Arabia tends to prioritise stability and consistency over speed. They want to ensure that normalisation, if undertaken, will have a strong foundation, especially in terms of security and economics, so as not to cause domestic turmoil.

Despite being more cautious, Saudi Arabia still shows signs of pragmatism through adaptive foreign policy and long-term preparation. Within the framework of Vision 2030, Saudi Arabia has undertaken various domestic reforms, opened up the business and tourism sectors, and established broader economic relations with Western countries as part of its economic diversification. Normalisation with Israel, although not yet formalised, is one of many strategic options prepared for when geopolitical and domestic conditions allow. Thus, Saudi Arabia is positioning itself as a key country that is indirectly moving towards pragmatism, albeit with greater control and caution than the UAE.

### **Palestinian Dynamics**

The UAE continues to employ the narrative of supporting the two-state solution to maintain moral legitimacy and mitigate public resistance; however, its foreign policy practices reveal a stronger emphasis on national stability and strategic advantage. A similar dynamic is evident in Saudi Arabia, albeit with a more cautious approach (Wardoyo & Valentino, 2022). Saudi Arabia continues to uphold its political support for Palestine in international forums but has gradually begun to open indirect channels of communication with Israel for security and economic purposes (Hakiem et al., 2023). This shift signifies a major transformation in the foreign policy orientation of Arab states—from ideological solidarity rooted in religion and shared history toward a more realist, interest-based approach. The pursuit of normalization without a resolution to the Palestinian conflict indicates that the issue is no longer the primary determinant of Arab foreign policy direction (Rahman & Salsabila, 2023). Nevertheless, both the UAE and Saudi Arabia continue to seek a balance between political pragmatism and their moral responsibility toward the Palestinian cause.

### **Regional Impact**

The normalization of relations between the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Israel has brought about a significant shift in the political and security configuration of the Middle East. The Abraham Accords marked the emergence of a new alliance pattern that is more grounded in strategic interests rather than ideological solidarity (Wardoyo & Valentino, 2022). The UAE, Israel, and, indirectly, Saudi Arabia are now viewed as part of a new bloc characterized by a pro-Western and anti-Iran orientation. This change has altered the regional balance of power, as states such as Iran, Syria, and proxy groups

like Hezbollah are increasingly perceived as common threats (Tahmi et al., 2022). Thus, normalization not only affects bilateral diplomatic relations but also reshapes the regional political and security landscape toward a more realist and pragmatic order. The normalization of relations between the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Israel has brought about a significant shift in the political and security configuration of the Middle East.

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While normalization brings stability to some countries, it has also generated new tensions among members of the Arab League. Divergent views on Israel have caused political fragmentation within the Arab world. Several countries, such as the UAE, Bahrain, and Morocco that support normalization for economic and security interests, whereas others, including Algeria, Iraq, and Kuwait, firmly oppose it on the grounds of solidarity with Palestine. This situation weakens the collective position of the Arab League as a regional organization, as each state now tends to prioritize individual and pragmatic foreign policies (Jamilah et al., 2019). In other words, the normalization of diplomatic relations illustrates how national interests are beginning to replace the ideology of Pan-Arabism, which once served as the foundation of unity among Middle Eastern countries.

### **Pragmatism as a Long-Term Strategy**

The pragmatism demonstrated by the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Saudi Arabia in their relations with Israel represents an adaptation to the dynamic transformations of the international order. The declining military dominance of the United States in the Middle East and the growing influence of China and Russia have prompted Gulf states to adopt more flexible and independent approaches (Wardoyo & Valentino, 2022). This shift signifies a transition from identity-based diplomacy toward diplomacy grounded in rational calculations of strategic benefits. Both the UAE and Saudi Arabia recognize that in today's multipolar global system, dependence on a single great power is no longer effective. Consequently, they have begun to build more diversified alliance networks, including with Israel, which possesses advanced technological and military capabilities. This demonstrates how both states are recalibrating their foreign policies to remain relevant amid global geopolitical shifts.

This adaptation also reflects a changing perspective among Arab states toward modern diplomacy. Pragmatism has become an essential strategy for maintaining national stability and expanding international influence without being bound to past ideologies. In other words, pragmatism serves as the practical application of *rational choice theory* in foreign policy, wherein every decision is evaluated based on efficiency, opportunity, and outcomes that yield the greatest national advantage. The UAE and Saudi Arabia now place greater emphasis on tangible outcomes, such as security, investment, and economic progress rather than symbolic political solidarity. This view

aligns with the framework of rational choice theory, where policy analysis suggests that state decisions are made by weighing the potential costs and benefits (Rimapradesi & Sahide, 2021). Accordingly, normalization with Israel is not merely a short-term political maneuver but part of a long-term strategy to strengthen both states' positions within a new world order that demands flexibility and cross-ideological cooperation.

The normalization of relations with Israel also functions as a mechanism to accelerate national modernization agendas in both the UAE and Saudi Arabia. The economic, technological, and security cooperation emerging from normalization has become a key driver of both countries' efforts to diversify their economies (Tahmi et al., 2022). The UAE leverages this relationship to attract foreign investment, develop green technology, and enhance its tourism and education sectors. Meanwhile, Saudi Arabia connects its pragmatic approach to its long-term development blueprint, *Vision 2030*, which emphasizes strengthening the private sector, technology, and cultural initiatives. Although these steps have drawn criticism from parts of the Arab world for allegedly undermining the Palestinian cause, both the UAE and Saudi Arabia perceive the long-term economic and developmental benefits as far outweighing such concerns. This reflects a form of *calculative pragmatism* wherein national gains are prioritized over moral pressure or regional solidarity. Thus, the decision to normalize relations with Israel illustrates a form of political rationality oriented toward concrete outcomes and the sustainability of national development.

Beyond economic benefits, normalization has also been employed as an instrument to construct a more modern and moderate international image. The foreign policies of the UAE and Saudi Arabia demonstrate efforts to present themselves as Arab states capable of balancing Islamic identity with the demands of globalization (Putra et al., 2024). The UAE, for instance, highlights its role as a hub of innovation and multicultural diplomacy, while Saudi Arabia seeks to strengthen its international legitimacy through social reforms and economic openness. In this context, the "modern and moderate" image is not merely a matter of branding, but a pragmatic strategy aimed at enhancing diplomatic leverage, attracting global investment, and consolidating leadership legitimacy within the region. This positive image serves as a political asset used to expand international influence and reinforce bargaining power with major powers such as the United States and China.

Overall, the normalization with Israel signifies the emergence of a new paradigm in Middle Eastern foreign policy, one in which pragmatism replaces ideology as the primary compass for decision-making. For the UAE and Saudi Arabia, cross-ideological partnerships are no longer seen as deviations but as survival strategies within a multipolar system that demands flexibility, efficiency, and outcome-oriented approaches. By prioritizing rational calculation and long-term benefits, both countries have demonstrated that pragmatic foreign policy can serve as a vehicle for achieving national modernization while simultaneously strengthening their strategic positions on the international stage.

## CONCLUSIONS

The normalization of diplomatic relations between the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Israel, alongside Saudi Arabia's cautious steps in the same direction, reflects a form of strategic pragmatism in the foreign policy of Gulf states. The primary motivations include economic interests such as diversification and technological cooperation,

security needs related to countering the Iranian threat, and efforts to strengthen political support from the United States. The UAE has taken a more proactive role as the initiator of the Abraham Accords, while Saudi Arabia has proceeded more cautiously due to considerations of domestic legitimacy and the sensitivity of the Palestinian issue. The United States plays a dominant role as mediator, provider of military and economic incentives, and architect of a new political framework in the region. However, this normalization has occurred without any tangible resolution to the Palestinian conflict, indicating a shift among Arab states from ideological solidarity toward national interest-driven policy priorities.

The impact of this development is evident in the reconfiguration of regional alliances, the emergence of trilateral cooperation among Arab states, Israel, and the United States, and the potential fragmentation within the Arab League. In the long term, this strategic pragmatism demonstrates the capacity of the UAE and Saudi Arabia to adapt to a transforming international order and to employ normalization as an instrument of national modernization, aimed at enhancing stability, economic resilience, and their global standing within an increasingly dynamic Middle Eastern landscape.

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