

The Abraham Accords and Iran's Unconventional Warfare Activities

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What is ViTTa?

NSI's Virtual Think Tank (ViTTa) provides rapid response to critical information needs by pulsing a global network of subject matter experts (SMEs) to generate a wide range of expert insight. In support of US Central Command (J3), ViTTa was used to address four questions regarding geopolitical stability in Iran. ViTTa reports are designed to provide highly customizable and compelling analyses, reports, and briefings that consider varied perspectives across disciplines, challenge assumptions, provide actionable insights, and highlight areas of convergence and divergence.

Question of Focus

[Q4] How have the Abraham Accords shaped Iranian activity abroad in terms of unconventional warfare (UW)?

Subject Matter Expert Contributors

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The Abraham Accords and Iran's UW Activity

The Abraham Accords normalizing diplomatic and economic relations between Israel and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and Israel and Bahrain, as well as a less robust agreement with Sudan, represent a historic turning point for Israel. Together with the Camp David Accords (Egypt) and the 1994 Peace Accord (Jordan), the Abraham Accords bring to five the number of Arab states that have *officially* recognized Israel's right to exist—a claim that states in the Gulf and Near East have denied since Israel was founded. For many Palestinians, on the other hand, the Accords are a devastating reminder of the historic indifference of the Arab states to their plight. To Iran, the Accords do not appear to represent anything new, yet. However, if the Accords led to close security ties between Israel and the Gulf states, Iran would face an unprecedented regional security environment that could impact its use of unconventional warfare tactics.



Figure 1. Source: US Department of State. <https://www.state.gov/the-abraham-accords/>

¹ Dr. Katzman was interviewed for this project in his personal capacity. His comments do not reflect the views of the Congressional Research Service or the Library of Congress.

No New Reality in the Gulf

In this report, we take a broad view of Iran’s “unconventional warfare” (UW) tactics to include plausibly deniable activities such as 1) cyber and cyber-enabled influence campaigns; 2) support for, and employment of, various insurgent or auxiliary forces to serve as Iranian proxies; and 3) efforts to influence sympathetic (Shi’a and non-Shi’a) communities around the globe. The ultimate goal of each is the same: to apply indirect pressure on Iran’s adversaries to diminish their willingness or ability to fight Iran directly.²

The majority view among the SMEs is that because the Accords do not fundamentally alter Iran’s view of the regional environment, they are not likely to impact its activities. There are a number of reasons for this. First, the Islamic Republic already sees the Gulf states as illegitimate and poor defenders of the faith (Ottolenghi). Second, Iran has long been aware of “covert” intelligence cooperation between Israel and the UAE (Eisenstadt). Third, in and of themselves, the Accords do nothing to exacerbate or relieve the economic pressures on the regime, or its “paranoia” about the intentions of regional actors; that is, they have not challenged Iran’s core belief that the leaders of the Gulf states, the United States, and Israel are lined up against Iran (Connell). As a result, it is unsurprising that none of the SMEs have observed or anticipate anything other than nominal changes in Iran’s activities—unconventional warfare or otherwise—attributable solely to the Abraham Accords. It will take something more than codifying known relationships to change Iranian strategy and activity abroad.

Despite the Timing, Iran’s “Moment of Calibration” is not a Response to the Accords

There was a marked increase in military tension in the Persian Gulf from 2019 through the summer of 2020—just prior to conclusion of the Abraham Accords. At that point, Ayatollah Khamenei reportedly ordered the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) to back-off and avoid further provoking the United States and its regional allies (Nader, Vatanka). If not the impeding Accords, what explains the coincidental drop in Iran’s tolerance for regional tension, what Dr. Sanam Vakil, of Chatham House, calls Iran’s “moment of calibration”? The short answer is a perfect storm of the regime’s critical concerns:

- **Threat to regime stability from domestic unrest.** A run of serious anti-government protests began in November 2019 and, while diminished, continue even as the government has been more forceful in punishing (and executing) Iranians expressing opposition to the regime. The protests have many sources but are linked by grievance over Iran’s economic crisis, public outrage at widespread government corruption and the mismanagement of the regime’s COVID response, as well as ire at the government’s diversion of funds to support non-Iranian proxies in Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, and Palestine (Nader, Vatanka). By June-July of 2020, grievance had not abated and, fearful of a resurgence of riots that could destabilize it, the regime intensified efforts to suppress dissent.
- **Uncertainty about US policy.** According to Alex Vatanka, of the Middle East Institute, in late summer 2020, Khamenei asked Iranian leaders to tone down provocation of the United States in the Gulf. The Ayatollah was concerned about the outcome of the US presidential election and the approach the next

² Because it is not necessarily directed at overthrowing another government, Iran’s use of UW is closer to the description of irregular warfare in the Irregular Warfare Annex to the 2018 National Defense Strategy (NDS).

US administration might take toward the region. With regard to the Accords, Vernie Liebl, of II Corps Consultants, believes Iran is waiting to see what will happen to the normalization initiative under a Biden administration. Or, as Vakil explains, the regime is "trying to get to January 20th without any kinetic activity...that's the objective from Tehran."

- **An empty purse.** Finally, Christopher Bidwell, of the Federation of American Scientists, argues that, given Iran's economic woes, it simply cannot afford the cost of engaging in a serious, military conflict right now. Vatanka also questions how much spare capacity Iran has for external activities given that the regime is on the defensive at home and needs to consolidate.

What Effect Could the Accords Have? It Depends on How Far Normalization Goes

As noted above, most of the SMEs expect that if the Abraham Accords remain limited to diplomatic and economic initiatives, their impact on Iranian activities will be nominal. If normalization includes close military cooperation between Arab states and Israel, deployment of Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) troops, or stationing of Israeli weapons systems in the Gulf, the experts agree that all bets are off. While most see this as a long-shot, Alireza Nader, of the Foundation for Defense of Democracies, points out that the Biden administration's approach to the region could incentivize Abraham signatories to extend relations into security cooperation. If the Biden administration reinforces the Arab states' uncertainty about whether the United States would back them in a conflict with Iran, he argues, they will inevitably seek their own solutions.

While they are certainly interrelated, in order to examine the potential impact on Iran's UW activities, we extrapolate from the independent effect of two outcomes: 1) political and diplomatic normalization (i.e., the Abraham Accords as most SMEs expect they will be implemented), and 2) Israeli Defense Forces presence and/or operations in the Gulf—what many SMEs argue is an important a red line for Iran. Because international and maximum pressure sanctions have been critical determinants of Iran's use of UW, we include that as a third factor, as shown in Figure 3.

	Abraham Accords	+ Sanctions	+ Israeli military in Gulf
Proxy Forces		↑	↑
Outreach	↑		↑
Cyber	↑	↑	

Figure 2. Increased use of Iran's UW tools associated with the Abraham Accords, continued sanctions, and Israeli presence in the Gulf.

Economic and Diplomatic Normalization

The main independent effect of the Accords as currently perceived (and as written) follows from the nature of the region's tendency toward zero-sum relations: the greater the number of Arab states that recognize Israel, the fewer diplomatic opportunities Iran will have in the Middle East. While nominal, this could impel Iran to look for added avenues of support and trade in the region and beyond.³

³ A few of the experts also offer suggestions as to ways that the Accords could prompt minor changes in Iranian defense thinking, if not tactics. Nader argues that the Accords show that Iran's policy of opposing Israel has essentially failed. Ian Williams, of the Center for Strategic and International Studies, expects that the normalization of relations with Israel eventually will require Iran to amend its strategy to encircle Saudi Arabia. Also, whereas in the past the UAE probably would not have been an Iranian target in the event of a regional conflict, the odds are now higher that it will be. Finally, the

Different narratives and wider outreach. Bidwell argues that any cooperation between Israel and the Gulf states makes it harder for Iran to achieve its regional objectives, which has already prompted an adjustment in Iran’s influence messaging. Dr. Michael Connell, of the Center for Naval Analyses, expects Iran to continue to portray the Abraham states (and others who sign similar agreements) as having made a deal with the devil, selling out on the Palestinian cause, and, by implication, bad Muslims. Fewer regional opportunities could also accelerate Iran’s efforts to develop relationships with sympathetic states, Shi’a communities, and, more frequently, disaffected non-Shi’a populations outside the region. Dr. Emanuele Ottolenghi, of the Foundation for Defense of Democracies, offers the South Caucasus as an area in which Iran is likely to become more active as its opportunities in the Gulf recede (see also the Q3 ViTTa report for further discussion of Iranian activities in Latin America). In fact, Iran has already adapted its religion-based recruitment process (i.e., establishing mosques, deploying clerics, training local clerics in Iran) to allow for “more ecumenical” outreach that includes recruitment of disaffected populations and any and all opposed to the United States (Taleblu).

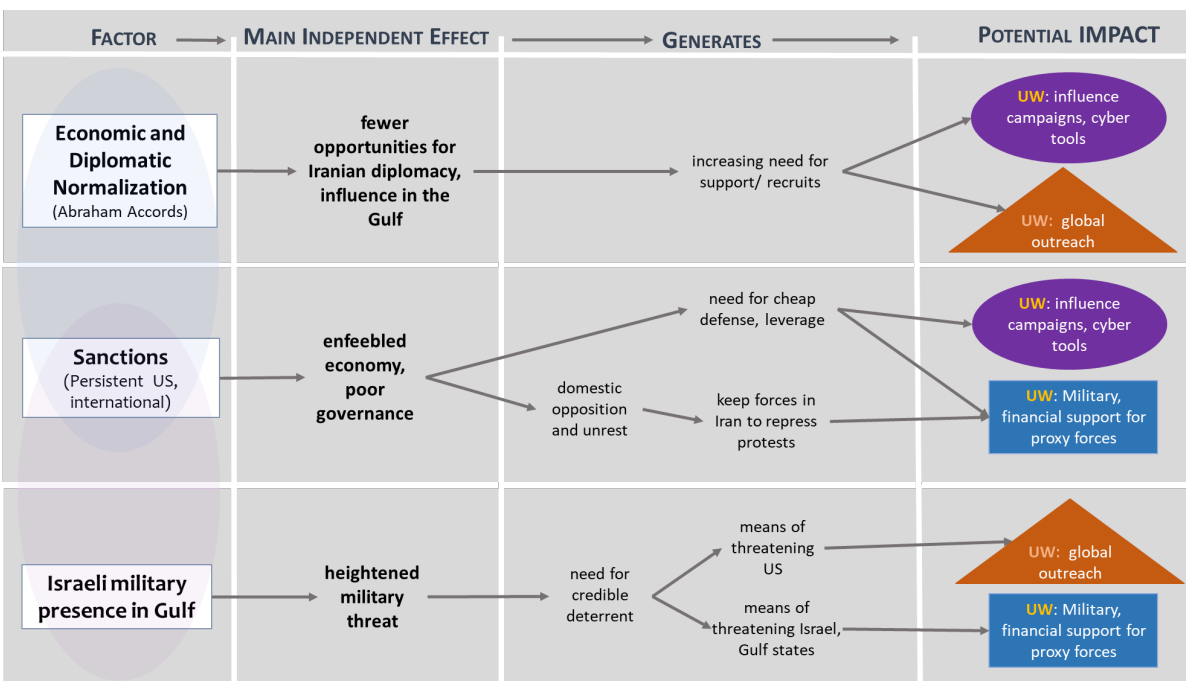


Figure 3. Summary of SME input on independent effects of the Accords, sanctions, and Israeli military presence in the Gulf on use of UW tools.

Sanctions

The impact of decades of sanctions and years of maximum pressure on its economy challenges both Iran’s capacity to employ UW tools and the forms its activities must take.

Enhanced cyber-enabled influence campaigns. While Iran is still largely focused on garnering support among Shi’a communities in the region, advancements in communication technologies continue to reduce the cost of conducting wide-reaching influence campaigns. As sanctions contribute to the enfeeblement of Iran’s economic capacity, the need to economize on its defenses will grow and could incentivize Iran to expand its relatively low

anonymous expert holds that the Accords reduce Iran’s capacity to use Shi’a populations in the UAE and Bahrain in the same way that it is has leveraged Shi’a communities in southern Lebanon against Israel.

cost, low risk cyber capabilities. According to Connell, Iran is already conducting information activities on a global scale, including using social media to put forward information that supports its worldview, and other forms of “cyber-enabled information operations.” The Iranians, he says, are not “a top-tier [cyber] power like Russia or China, but their cyber capabilities aren't exactly bad either.”

Use of proxies. Iran’s long-standing preference for using proxy actors follows from the security environment in which it finds itself (i.e., in conflict with a superior military power) together with capability challenges that decades of international sanctions have wrought. Dr. Kenneth Katzman, of the Congressional Research Service, points out that having less money as a result of economic constrictions has not caused Iran to retrench either regionally or across the globe. Its reliance on proxy actors will not be replaced in the foreseeable future (Katzman, Leibel, Bidwell). Indeed, Ottolenghi observes that there is no sign of an Iranian retreat: it still has a strong foothold on Israel’s border in Lebanon, has propped up the Assad regime on another of Israel’s borders, retains influence among Palestinians in Gaza, and continues to be an expensive thorn in the side of KSA which has been unable to defeat Iran’s proxy in Yemen. Proxies are cheap, and hold, for the regime, the comfort of some amount of plausible deniability. Finally, Nader offers an equally compelling explanation for why Iran will not likely move away from its use of foreign proxies: the domestic insecurity of the regime. He argues that the regime is limited – it cannot maintain internal security if it deploys troops abroad. This is one reason why support for proxies is such a good deal: it is a way to assure Iranian influence without having to send Iranian troops abroad.

Israeli Military Presence in the Gulf

While there is a broad range of opinion among the SMEs, the general consensus is that significant change in Iran’s defense strategy, including use of UW tools, will require a more substantial event or combination of factors than the Abraham Accords (Bidwell). Though political or economic normalization may not be a “game changer” (Katzman), as Bidwell explains, the appearance of “Israeli warplanes flying over Iran...or an Israeli submarine in the Gulf” would almost surely heighten Iran’s perception of the immediacy of external threats to its security. If this were to occur, demonstrating a robust and credible deterrent capability would likely take on even greater urgency than it has today. Iran has been working to increase its influence in Latin America partially as a means of imposing costs on the United States in the event of a conflict, and it is reasonable to suspect that as its threat perception rises, these activities may be extended to other regions as well. Similarly, both Bidwell and the expert who prefers to remain anonymous point to Iran’s relationships with Hezbollah and other organizations in Lebanon and Syria, Hamas in Gaza, and Houthi rebels in Yemen as providing strategic depth against Israel and Saudi Arabia. Katzman offers another reason for Iran’s concern about the potential for Israeli military expansion in the region. Iran believes that, in any conflict, the United States is more likely to come to Israel’s aid than it would to support the Gulf states, and such US involvement almost immediately escalate a regional conflict.

Conclusion: Changes Will be Minor Unless Israeli Forces Show Up in the Gulf

In large measure, the impact of the Abraham Accords will hinge on whether normalized diplomatic and economic relations evolve into serious military cooperation (an evolution that has not happened despite Israel’s peace accords with Egypt and Jordan). If the Accords clear the path for Israeli military operations or platforms in the Gulf, Iran’s threat perception will intensify substantially (Eisenstadt, Taleblu). Furthermore, though subtle, it is worth noting that should Israel-Gulf relations evolve to include security cooperation, the same actions that

would not necessarily have provoked Iranian response (e.g., the UAE limiting Iranian smuggling activities, Saudi Arabia joining the Accords) may appear significantly more aggressive (Vakil). Even so, Bidwell cautions that, with the exception of a direct attack on Iranian territory, as long as the “Saudis and the UAE and Israel aren't doing anything...I don't see [the Iranians] having anything to inspire them” to become aggressive, especially he says, if they are suffering from significant internal problems stemming from the state of the economy.
