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The Abraham Accords Two Years On: A New Middle East?

Fireside Chat with Fireside Chat with Benjamin Gantz, Minister of Defense, Israel

Moderator: Jeffrey Goldberg, Editor-in-Chief, *The Atlantic*

Usher (00:00):

Everyone, please make your way to your seats. As the program is about to begin, please make your way to your seats as the program is about to begin. Thank you

Anja Manuel (02:04):

Right, ladies and gentlemen, please take your seats. I hope everyone enjoyed their lunch. Got a little time in the outdoors, and we now have a very special double session for you. We are really honored to have two distinguished senior officials from the middle east with us. And as you know, cuz I've been saying it every opportunity. The theme of this conference is that in the face of all of these complicated challenges in the world, what are we doing to think more creatively and to transform ourselves while the biggest public sea change in international relations recently have to have been the Abraham Accords signed between Israel, uh, the UAE Ukraine and the United States, and now also incorporating others. So we're gonna have two separate discussions that touch on these issues. First we have Israeli defense minister, Benny Goz, who of course has been seeing, overseeing a metamorphosis in Israeli, military and national security relations in the middle east, including recently joining the middle east air defense Alliance and many other things he'll tell you about. And then we'll have a conversation to give us the SUNY Arab perspective. We have Abdu Khalifa, the undersecretary of political affairs from Bahrain. Who's playing a leading role in implementing the Abraham Accords in his country. So let me welcome you to the stage Mr. Goz, Jeff.

Jeffrey Goldberg (03:48):

Thank you. Thanks Ana. Very much. Thanks to everyone for coming. Thank you, Mr. Minister. Um, we have, uh, now we have all the instructions. Oh no, he's taking them away. We're gonna be spontaneous. <laugh> uh, thank you for coming

Benjamin Gantz (04:07):

This guy flew way from Israel just to put it over here. And I said, well, thank you. <laugh>

Jeffrey Goldberg (04:11):

You're free to go on a hike now.

Benjamin Gantz (04:14):

Just think of it.

Jeffrey Goldberg (04:16):

Nice to have that many aids, right? Yeah. Uh, let's uh, let's jump right in. People want to, um, understand the significance of the Abraham Accords and that's the, the stated topic we're gonna arrange fairly widely. Um, because as all of you know, uh, minister GS, also a candidate for prime minister in, uh, Israel has elections every two months and he's gonna be standing in the, in the next seven or eight elections. He's gonna be running for prime minister. Um, but we'll get, we'll get there in a, in a, in a minute. Um, it is for people who've watched the middle east for a long time. It is still astonishing to realize that Israel has diplomatic relations with countries like Bahrain, UAE, Morocco, and so on. Um, that the relationship between Israel and Saudi Arabia is still under the table, but everybody knows that there's constructive discourse going on. Um, I would love it for you. I, if you could describe the, the meaning and the significance of the Abraham Accords, specifically in the context of the coming confrontation with Iran, and I'm making an assumption that there's a coming confrontation, but all indications are that something is coming to a, to a head.

Benjamin Gantz ([05:34](#)):

Yes, Jeff, thank, thank you very much. And first and foremost, I'm, I'm really happy to be here and to be speaking about the different opportunities and challenges that we have in the middle east. And when I'm saying we in the middle east, I mean, United States, the Western world, and of course the middle Eastern countries themselves with a, with different challenges. And if I go straight to your questions about the Abraham Accords, and I'm very pleased to be, uh, sharing the stage with my friend Abdullah from, from back friend, this is the second time actually we do it. Um, we can continue. I don't know why we have to go back to work sometime, but we could, we could jump from one, one event to another, right? I mean, that could have been a good idea. Uh, however, I think that the Abraham Accords symbols, the acceptance of Israel is part of the middle east.

Benjamin Gantz ([06:41](#)):

And let me take you to a story by this, because this is all started. And honestly speaking, when we were first established the first few decades, we were trying to be kicked out from the region and only after 67 73 war, the reality that Israel is an ex existing part of the right of the middle east became to a realization and it started with saw that visit. So just imagine yourself. When president Sadat came to Israel at the end of 1977, I was a very young soldier still in my bootcamp training. I was called to secure Sadat convoy. When he came to speak his peace speech in the Israeli, in the Israeli parliament, 40 years later, I'm flying in the very same aircraft to background as a minister of defense of the state of Israel to sign an outbreak agreement with Barran you women with background U MOU security MOU between us and background. So first and foremost, just think of it. You know, we don't, we look at it at the event of the last two years. It's the closing event, hopefully not the last one of the last four years of accepting Israel as part of the region.

Benjamin Gantz ([08:14](#)):

Um, those agreements enable us to expand our relations in security aspects, but also in business to business organizations, to organizations, people, to people. And of course we can create, uh, kind of a regional architecture. I would say between the different countries. There is another segment that came later on, but it's part of it in a way Israel was transferred from Yuko to CENTCOM, which enables us, or we use it as a strategic umbrella to coordinate between the different countries in the middle east. Uh, I can tell you that there have been hundreds of visits between officials of, of defense establishment be

between the sides and Israel have participated in more than in 10 multi national exercises in the middle east. Now, if you would ask me that five years ago, I will tell you, uh, I think that's not the case, but I'm very happy that the us led this.

Benjamin Gantz ([09:30](#)):

I'm very happy that we had leaders in all the places that realize this opportunity to do that. I'm very happy that I blocked the threat of relaxation of Judah and Samaria, because if we were to annex those areas, I don't think that we could have pract practically move forward with Abraham Accords. And I think that currently we are in a better middle east. As we see before now, going to your Iran issue, Iran is threatening the other countries. As much as it's threatening the state of Israel, Iran is a global challenge. You can see it in Venezuela. You can see it in South Africa, in south America. You can see it in Algeria. You can see it in the entire region, what they do in Lebanon, what they do in, uh, in Iraq, what they do in Syria, what they do in Yemen and more, and the Saudis are suffering and, and the UAE is suffering from the Iranian, practically speaking, actively speaking more than Israel suffers from them. So I think that to create an architecture that can cooperate with the freedom of shipment in the sea, in or on cyber activities or air defense and that kind of things. It's very good. And, and, and you rightly said, uh, we have good relations with all the countries, uh, around the region. And I hope that down the time more and more countries will come out and make it out. Like if

Jeffrey Goldberg ([11:03](#)):

You didn't have the pressure of the existential threat, even of Iran, do you think that these Arab countries would've been so quick to make relations with Israel?

Benjamin Gantz ([11:14](#)):

I think that those countries have realized that Israel is there to stay. I think those countries have realized that Israel is not a burden. It's an asset. I think they realize the good relations that Israel has with the United States. It's a good bridge to be used and altogether we never threatened them while the Iranian do so. So I think they took the right decisions from their own perspective.

Jeffrey Goldberg ([11:42](#)):

One more question about Iran. And I want to go to another aspect of the Abraham Accords. If you asking you as minister of defense, the Iran talks leading to a deal, seem to be on a road to failure. Iran seems closer than ever to nuclearization. Are you prepared to confront Iran alone? And do you think you could set their program back militarily in a significant way?

Benjamin Gantz ([12:07](#)):

Yes. Uh, this is a, this is a serious issue and, and, and, and speaking word widely, I would say we all see Iran's malign activities in the region and elsewhere. Now they're doing all that without having the nuclear canopy deterrence to support it. Now, just try to figure out the reality, how would they act without using nuclear, but just using the nuclear canopy in all those, uh, activities that we are seeing around the region. Secondly, and, and this is why we should not let it get to nuclear capabilities. And, you know, speaking of Biden's visit, you know, he came and he out loud said that United States will not allow Iran to become nuclear. And I think that this is a very important strategic statement by him and by any leader of the United States lately. So I think this is very important, but let us be strategically candid. I

would say I'm not aware of any other country in the world that there is another country in our case, Iran that is calling for its destruction and building the means to do so.

Benjamin Gantz ([13:42](#)):

And I think that for the national reasons, the world should stop it. I think that for regional reasons, the region should be United around it. And I think that we as Israeli government, as leaders of the Jewish country, have an historical responsibility to make sure that that doesn't happen. You know, Joe, let Jeff, let me, I, I don't like to do it too often. I come from a Holocaust survivor family. My mother survived in Belgium. My father was a refugee in Europe. They came to Israel and built it after, during the independence war. And after that, Israel is not an experiment. Israel is an historic evident that will always be there. And it's our responsibility to make sure now, should we jump to a war with the first opportunity we have? No. Should, should we be able to conduct military operation to prevent it if needed? The answer is yes. Are we building the, the ability? Yes. Should we use it as the last case? Yes. And I hope that we will get United States. And you

Jeffrey Goldberg ([15:08](#)):

Said you're building the capability. It's not built

Benjamin Gantz ([15:10](#)):

Already. No, it is. But you know, uh, uh, uh, it's like a screw. You always try to expand it and to, to, to advance it and to have better capabilities and you're not leaning back saying, okay, I have the solution, but you always work on it. I,

Jeffrey Goldberg ([15:24](#)):

I, I want to jump back to the Abraham accord, uh, for one second, but you mentioned the idea that Israel is the only country under existential threat from a nuclear power, or would be nuclear power. Ukraine is under existential threat from Russia, which is a nuclear power. And as you well know the Ukrainians, including its Jewish president, want Israel to say much more about Russia and do much more in defense of Ukraine. Why has Israel been so Luke warm in its support of Ukraine when there is so obviously a connection there?

Benjamin Gantz ([15:57](#)):

Yeah, so definitely I think we have, uh, two strategic lesson learned immediately out of it. You see what happens with country possess nuclear capabilities? What are the limitations of acting against it? Secondly, we see from the Ukrainian, uh, war from the war in Ukraine, that every country must be able to protect itself, uh, by itself. And this is, uh, a second nature for the state of Israel, but not all countries are used to it. And some of them thought that wars are history events and they will never happen. And all of a sudden it did. Israel is definitely on the Western side. Israel is definitely on the Ukrainian side. Uh, uh, we are supporting it in all the diplomatic measures. We have supported it with all the humanitarian aid that is possible hundreds of time of equipment enter. We have opened a filled hospital, the treated more than 6,000 Ukrainian. We have absorbed in Israel, dozens of thousands of Ukrainian, Russian, and Belarus that came as a result of this campaign. And we are sending them non offensive equipment. Uh, to Ukraine. We do have our operational considerations. We are sharing an aerial border, uh, with the Russians above Syria. We are being threatened from our Northern front. So we have other calculus that we have to take in our mind that I would say real

Jeffrey Goldberg (17:27):

Politic has Russia threatened you directly.

Benjamin Gantz (17:29):

They're not threatening us directly, but, uh, we have, we have to make sure that we have a dialogue connections with them. They form a prime minister, even try to use those, uh, in order to mitigate between Ukraine and Russia. Uh, and we have to deconflict ourselves from them. So this is very tiny situation over there.

Jeffrey Goldberg (17:46):

Does this real politic position bother you as a Jew?

Benjamin Gantz (17:55):

It bothers any war in any loss of civilian lives. You know, militaries are there to protect their countries. Uh, and I'm always saying that, uh, you do operations when you can, but you go to work when you don't have any other choice. And I hate to see civilian being killed and infrastructure being destroyed. And of course, uh, we even had some horrible event of that comes from values of fighting of how to conduct fighting, et cetera. Uh, so we do all this, uh, support and we will continue to do so. And whenever we can help to mitigate between Ukraine and Russia, we will be very happy to do so.

Jeffrey Goldberg (18:42):

Let me come back to Abraham accord for one minute, a group of people who are not happy, or at least at political leadership, not happy about the Abraham accord or the Palestinians who feel like they're being left behind by the Abraham accord. How do you address the two state solution within the context of the, the, the Palestinian complaint that you are bypassing them completely in making relations with other Arab states?

Benjamin Gantz (19:07):

Yeah, first, um, I'm very happy that the Palestinian issue was not a blocking threshold that blocked those very positive development as we see in the middle east now. So I'm very happy on that fact. Secondly, I would like to tell you that from a Zionist perspective, from a Jewish democratic and Zionist perspective, I would like to see a better future between us and the Palestinians I've met with Abu ma and myself in the last year, three times, I am the one who's responsible for the coordination with them. I am the one that responsible for the measures that confidence building measures that we are doing with them. And I've conducted in the last two years, more than 30 measures, different steps that I did with the Palestinian in order to create a better reality. I think that in both sides and, and I told it to Abu Mak when I met with him, you know, I told him Mr.

Benjamin Gantz (20:26):

Bus, I had a dream that you won't be here. And I'm sure you had the very same dream about me, but guess what? We are both here. And we have to find ways of living one side another. And I think that the more we invest in strategic dialogue, the more we invest in infrastructure, the more we make sure that there is a security, then there is a stability. And then there is, uh, economy, uh, prosperity, I would say. And hopefully we can down the road, be able to create what I called a bridging situation. My own phrase to it is two entity situation to create a better positive situation underground that will enable us in the future to come to a permanent arrangement between the Palestinian and us. And everybody can take

his own words for that description. Uh, I want to make sure that Israel stays strong, secure, democratic, and Jewish, and that means that we will have to solve our issues with the Palestinians.

Jeffrey Goldberg ([21:41](#)):

Uh, we're gonna have time.

Benjamin Gantz ([21:42](#)):

And by the way, we will, uh, we need, and we can, and we should take advantage of the countries in the middle east by itself to support those trends in terms of investing in the Palestinian authority countries from the Gulf, et cetera. And I think we can do that, right.

Jeffrey Goldberg ([21:59](#)):

We're gonna have time for one question probably from the audience. But before that, let me just ask one final question. What is your strategy for defeating your former boss and current rival Benjamin Netanyahu for the prime ministership? Because if there's one thing we know about Benjamin Netanyahu, he likes being prime minister and he is good at keeping the job generally.

Benjamin Gantz ([22:21](#)):

Uh, yes, I think that, uh, Benjamin Netanyahu has done a lot for the state of Israel. Uh, he's a journalistic person. He served the country in military service. His brother sacrificed his life for the state of Israel. He himself served as a prime minister and I don't take it anywhere easily, but I think that, uh, uh, it's time in the political life of the state of Israel, uh, is different now. Uh, I think that, uh, uh, what I, what happened since I and my friend joined the political arena three and a half years ago, that Netanyahu was blocked. Then when I came to unity government with him due to the COVID situation, I took half of his government. And then I allowed a change to a government of change to come up, which we are now facing. And this is the elections that we are now going.

Benjamin Gantz ([23:19](#)):

It's going to be our fifth elections in four years time, definitely a world record, I would say political world record. Um, um, and, um, my plan is to build a wide unity government with all segments of the Israeli society to exclude the, the extreme edges. I don't think that they should set their agenda. I think that the center of government of Israel should set their agenda. I think that increasing unity within the Israeli society is part of a national resilience. It's important for us to be able to cope with external threats. And this is my plan. I exclude no one basically. And the difference between me and others that no one excludes me. So I think I have a fair chance to succeed, but we will see, uh, whether it's gonna be on the fifth election or on the sixth elections or whatever, come

Jeffrey Goldberg ([24:25](#)):

Keep practicing until you get it. Right. Right. Uh, I have time for one quick question, please make it in the form just right here. Please make it in the form of a question. And please give us an efficient answer because we have to cover the entire middle east in the next 20 minutes too.

Speaker 5 ([24:39](#)):

I'm Moak Krieger. And the question is this, the failure of all of the experiences where there has been a negotiation between Israel and the Palestinians has really been because the Palestinians refuse to accept the existence, the existence of the Jewish state of Israel. How can there be a positive resolution after that?

Benjamin Gantz ([25:05](#)):

It's, uh, very much true. Uh, and I think it takes serious historical understanding of the importance to take this decision

Benjamin Gantz ([25:22](#)):

And some leadership courage, I would say because, you know, I think it was Truman who said president Truman, who said that leadership is the ability to convince people, to do the things that deepen their hearts. They know it is the right things to do. And I think that is the case. Most Israelis will not like to control the Palestinian, to govern the Palestinians. All the Israelis don't want to take a security risk of a terror entity over the Hills, over the center of Israel, as we have experienced from Gaza, for example, but we do need to move forward and to find ways to politically separate ourselves from the Palestinians, Palestinians understands they need to live their life. Yes, they have difficulties. Yes. They had dreams. Yes, they had hopes, but there is reality. And once they will look into the future and not only speak about the, and we will have leaders on both sides that will be encouraging us courageous enough to do that. Then I think that all NA all two peoples will eventually support it. What are the alternatives for us to have a stronger Hamas, bad alternative? What is the alternative for us to have one country for two nations? That's a very bad alternative for us as well. There's no way everyone knows it. They just have to be brave enough to follow what they really understands deep in their heart is the Tru and said, I hope he changed one day.

Jeffrey Goldberg ([27:16](#)):

Minister Gant. Thank you very, very much for coming today. I appreciate it. Um, and I'd like to invite our next guest from the middle east, our next contestant on middle east sweepstakes to come up to our stage. Thank you very much.

Benjamin Gantz ([27:32](#)):

Was a palace woman, man. Yeah.