
MINILATERALISM AND THE REALIGNMENT OF POWER: I2U2, THE NEGEV FORUM, AND THE MAKING OF A POST- IDEOLOGICAL MIDDLE EAST

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ABSTRACT

Minilateral groups such as the I2U2 and the Negev Forum reflect a decisive restructuring of power, agency and institutional design in the contemporary Middle East. The emergence of these platforms reflects both the erosion of post-war Arab multilateralism and a regional shift towards functional, interest-based cooperation driven by economic diversification, technological interdependence and fractured threat perceptions. This paper seeks to examine whether the groups reproduce a recalibrated form of U.S. embedded hegemony. Through doctrinal, strategic and comparative analysis of regional alignments, this study navigates how institutional fragility, United States retrenchment, intra-GCC divisions and the normalization trend following the Abraham Accords have catalysed the need for narrow, agile coalitions that bypass traditional consensus-based bodies. This paper demonstrates that while minilaterals enable rapid coordination and reflect region specific adaptations they continue to remain structured around asymmetrical power relations particularly with regards to the United States regulatory, financial and technological dominance in I2U2 and its agenda setting power in the Negev Forum. Simultaneously competing axes like Iran, Turkey, Qatar, China and Saudi's hedging practices constrain any singular U.S. led regional order. This analysis showcases that these minilaterals both respond to and deepen regional fragmentation by privileging state-centric pragmatism, normalization without any political resolution especially with regards to the Palestinian issue and multi alignment over ideological unity. This paper concludes that while the I2U2 and the Negev Forum embody innovative frameworks of cooperation grounded in infrastructure, supply chains and strategic connectivity, their long-term stability continues to depend on U.S. engagement and evolving multipolar environment. Instead of marking an absolute break from hegemony they reveal a hybrid order where post-ideological pragmatism coexists within American structural power.

A. Introduction

The rise of minilateral models such as I2U2 and the Negev Forum signals a substantive transformation in the Middle East's regional order. Earlier institutions such as the Arab League or GCC were broad platforms for Arab consensus and collective regional action whereas these new frameworks operate through small, flexible coalitions which embody functional cooperation like infrastructure, technology, supply chains, energy, and economic diversification. Their emergence reflects the failure of earlier regional architectures that struggled to effectively respond to transnational crises. The erosion of pan- Arab projects particularly after the 1967 defeat exposed deep structural contradictions in region wide unity and by the 2000s Arab politics had shifted toward state centric pragmatism.

Events such as intra GCC crisis accelerated this trend and also evidenced how increasingly unfit multilateral frameworks had become to manage dynamic threats. Simultaneously the United States retrenchment from Iraq and Afghanistan and pivot to Asia reduced Washington's willingness to provide direct security guarantees. This created an opening in which states turned to narrow and agile formats for coordination.

This paper asks whether minilateral groups such as I2U2 and Negev Forum represent a new post ideological regional order and to what extent do they operate as a mechanism for continued U.S. power.

B. Conceptual Framework

a. Emergence of Minilateralism in the Middle East

Minilateralism in the Middle east refers to a small group whose cooperation is based on interests, and they bypass wider regional institutions to address urgent and fragmented strategic challenges.¹

Minilateralism gains significance as traditional multilateral institutions such as the Arab League and the Gulf Cooperation Council have long struggled with weak enforcement capacity, internal fractures which undermine their ability to function as unified regional orders. Since 2011 the region has experienced continuous security instability such as the collapse in

¹Felix Heiduk and Thomas Wilkins, *Minilateralism and pathways to institutional progression: alliance formation or cooperative security governance?*, 78 AUST. J.INT'L AFF. 601 (2024).

order in Syria and Libya, escalating Saudi and Iran rivalry and internal splits in the GCC that bring to light the demand for a narrow, agile and tailored diplomatic response rather than multilateral negotiations.² Minilaterals succeed where multilaterals fail because they allow coordination on targeted issues with speed and adaptability.

These structural weaknesses have pushed the Middle East towards a minilateral model. Events like the 2017-2021 GCC crisis and the Qatar blockade support the above since rather than resolving disputes through GCC mechanisms, Saudi Arabia, UAE, and Egypt formed their own sub coalition while Qatar formed partnerships with Turkey and Iran which led to the formation of competing minilateral blocs.³

In 2020 the Abraham Accords helped in normalisation agreements between Israel and Arab states which showed a clear move away from the Arab consensus with regards to the Palestinian issue. Such small group arrangements show a logic of placing pragmatism above collective Arab diplomacy. Following this the cutback of United States from Iraq, Syria and Libya show accelerated regional burden sharing. Minilateralism also helps Gulf states and Israel to engage in transaction-based security and economic initiatives rather than relying on the United States's multilateral platforms.⁴

Thus, Minilateralism in the Middle East is not merely a reflection of global trends, but it is rather region-specific adaptation. It is driven by institutional fragility, intra- regional conflict, and the need for targeted cooperation. To understand the functionality of Minilateralism, it is essential to situate it within the role of the United States as both a security guarantor and a structural power provider.

b. United States Hegemony in functional cooperation

The United States role in the Middle East is often shown from the Washington centric view, this perspective neglects how regional states independently perceive and negotiate their relationships with the United States. Historically, United States strategy in the Gulf has been focused on security commitments such as the Carter Doctrine which institutionalized Washington's willingness to use force to defend Gulf oil interests. The Oslo Process showcased

² Mate Szalai, *Smaller Gulf States and Competing Geopolitical Scripts in the Indo-Pacific*, 62 INT'L POL. 1 (2024).

³ *Id.*

⁴ *Id.*

United States efforts to pair diplomatic reform and politics, but this failed due to real security problems. The 2003 Iraq invasion further destabilized the regional balance and the post 2011 strategic pivot to Asia signalled a need for recalibration of U.S.s involvement in Middle East.⁵

However, U.S. continues to remain a partner even is there maybe resentment. Arab regimes have welcomed U.S. military and economic cooperation but rejected liberalization demands in the wake of the Arab Spring prioritizing the stability of the regime over political reform. At the same time the Gulf has sought greater strategic autonomy through initiatives such as engagement in OPEC+ or forming deeper links with emerging powers. Despite moves of self-assertion, functional cooperation in the Middle East continues to entrench and structured around U.S. power. Gulf states continue to rely heavily on American defence system and technical standards as U.S. military equipment. These dependencies are reinforced by legal and institutional frameworks such as export controls and defence contracts⁶

Even as regional actors diversify their partnerships, most security collaboration still operates within Washington's presence, like a form of "residual hegemony."

C. Historical and Strategic Context

In the second half of the twentieth century, the Middle East's regional balance if power was shaped by ideology of pan- Arabism but he projects which was a transnational vision of Arabs lost its appeal after repeated failures and ideological contradictions. The 1967 war exposed the limits of the pan- Arab movement which undermined confidence in the collective Arab leadership and fuelling a turn toward pragmatic, state centric politics.⁷

By the time of Arab Spring the ideological drive of pan- Arabism was replaced by fragmented national agendas. Israels diplomatic isolations also eroded because regional threat perceptions shifted and many gulf monarchies no longer saw Israel as their primary and started noticing Iran's rising influence particularly 2011 became existential for Sunni regimes.⁸

After the Muslim Brotherhood influence surged in 2013, Sunni autocracies viewed Islam as an

⁵ Nori Katagiri, *A Critical Assessment of the Asia Rebalance*, 12 CHINESE J. INT'L POL. 1 (2019).

⁶ Anthony H. Cordesman & Michael Peacock, *The UAE's BRICS Membership and the Global Role of Middle Powers*, CTR. FOR STRATEGIC & INT'L STUD. (Oct. 2025), <https://csis.org/analysis/uae-brics-membership>.

⁷ Fouad Ajami, *The End of Pan-Arabism*, 57 FOREIGN AFF. 355 (1978).

⁸ Nir Tuvia Boms & Hussein Aboubakr, *Pan Arabism 2.0? The Struggle for a New Paradigm in the Middle East*, 13 RELIGIONS 28 (2022).

internal threat helping justify reproachments with Israel. Over time UAE and Saudi leadership abandoned votes on normalization accepting Israel as a partner against Iran and Islamist movements.

At the same time the economic transformation of the Gulf states accelerated. Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 was designed to reduce dependence on oil by investing in tourism, technology, logistics and services. This diversification has helped underpin long term growth. This shift helps in erosion of security dependencies as the Gulf becomes more independent the need for security value from the U.S. becomes less compelling.⁹

The political and economic transformation evidences a broader trend which the rise of Minilateralism as post ideological order. With the decline in pan- Arabism and the weakening of ideological blocs states now pursue pragmatic, functional cooperation in narrow formats such diplomatic normalization, security coalitions, and economic hubs rather than broad projects. The normalization of Israel with Arab states through the Abraham Accords is an example of this wherein it is less about shared identity and more about shared interests especially against Iran and in diversifying individual economies. Herein Minilateralism becomes an instrument for balancing powers, managing threat perceptions, and advancing national transformations beyond ideological unity.

D. Case Studies

a. I2U2 (India, Israel, the UAE, and the United States)

A deeper evaluation of the I2U2 grouping comprises of India, Israel, the UAE, and the United States helps showcase the structural power inequalities that are embedded in the platform especially with regards to the disproportionate influence of the United States.

The United States structural power in the I2U2 is evident through its financial and regulatory leverage in the platform's architecture. An example of this would be the U.S. Trade and Development Agency funded the study for the 300 MW hybrid energy project in Gujrat underlining a strong U.S. role in underwriting key renewable infrastructure.¹⁰ Moreover the

⁹ Sarah Muhanna Al Naimi, *Economic Diversification Trends in the Gulf: The Case of Saudi Arabia*, 2 CIRCULAR ECON. & SUSTAINABILITY 1 (2022).

¹⁰ Ministry of External Affairs, *Joint Statement of the Leaders of India, Israel, United Arab Emirates, and the United States (I2U2)*, Gov't of India (July 14, 2022), <https://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm>.

regulatory dominance arises through United States's technology standards as seen in the emerging technology project such as the \$3 billion semiconductor plant in India is to be anchored in U.S. IP ownership, supply chain and regulatory architecture.¹¹ If a member were to defy U.S. imperatives the structure of the financing and the private public partnership is set up in a way that provides very little safeguard against american norms and business interests.¹²

The Middle Eastern partners use of I2U2 reveals a more nuanced and transactional logic rather than one of equal power cooperation. The UAE sees the I2U2 as a bridge connecting it to Asia, the Middle East and Europe by leveraging capital. Israel on the other hand uses it to benefit geopolitically which helps its normalization following the Abraham Accords and also in consolidating its integration into a broader economic network. India is provided with not only energy security but also leveraging the Gulf and market to deepen its economic ties and also diversify outside of oil and China dominated supply sources.¹³

The impact of the I2U2 on non- members underscores the role this group played on regional power competition. Iran has denounced I2U2 as an exclusionary alignment against its influence.¹⁴ Saudi Arabia's absence from the platform raises questions about the groupings broader regional legitimacy especially given its strategic importance. Pakistan too sees I2U2 cautiously as it suggests India's closer alignment to U.S. UAE and Israel which undercuts its traditional influence in the UAE.¹⁵ Meanwhile for China this is a U.S. centred effort to balance the China's growing footprint in West and South Asia.¹⁶

In totality the I2U2 cannot be seen as merely cooperative minilateral. It represents a strategically asymmetric structure where the U.S.s structural power I had seen through finance, regulatory norms, and supply chain control. The other members use the platform for their own benefit but under U.S. shaped terms. Meanwhile actors outside the I2U2 see it as a challenge

¹¹Mohammed Soliman, *The I2U2 Needs an Ambitious Tech Agenda*, MIDDLE EAST INST. (Sept. 19, 2022), <https://www.mei.edu/publications/i2u2-needs-ambitious-tech-agenda>.

¹² Office of the Spokesperson, *Launch of the I2U2 Private Enterprise Partnership*, U.S. Dep't of State (Sept. 21, 2023), <https://www.state.gov/launch-of-the-i2u2-private-enterprise-partnership>.

¹³ Navdeep Suri & Hargun Sethi, *The I2U2: Where Geography and Economics Meet*, OBSERVER RES. FOUND. (Feb. 27, 2023), <https://www.orfonline.org/research/the-i2u2-where-geography-and-economics-meet>.

¹⁴ Kabir Taneja, *The Gaza Crisis and Challenge to Future-Proof I2U2*, OBSERVER RES. FOUND. (Nov. 21, 2023), <https://www.orfonline.org/research/gaza-crisis-and-challenge-to-future-proof-i2u2>.

¹⁵Iqra Siddiqui, *Implications of AUKUS, I2U2, and BRICS for Pakistan*, ISLAMABAD POL'Y RES. INST. (Aug. 2023), <https://ipripak.org/implications-of-aukus-i2u2-and-brics-for-pakistan>.

¹⁶ Pooja Devi & Jyoti Singh, *The I2U2: China's Increasing Role in the Middle East and Geostrategic Implications on India*, 18 J. STRATEGIC SEC. 1 (2025).

in the evolving geopolitical order rather than a forum for mutual development.

b. Negev Forum

The Negev Forum was inaugurated in 2022 and is a group of Israel and several Arab states such as the UAE, Bahrain, Morocco, and Egypt and is celebrated as a breakthrough in Middle Eastern diplomacy. This highlights a significant gap especially with respect to Palestine question, Israel's domestic politics and Arabs strategic priorities.

One of the most glaring critiques of the Negev Forum is that it normalizes Israel's regional standing without advancing the Palestinian issue. The forum emerged without the participation of the Palestinian authority. Initially Palestine recalled its ambassadors from UAE and Bahrain in protest but later returned them as a more muted response.¹⁷ Although the Arab people remain strongly opposed to the normalization deals the young Gulf elites and political systems safeguards these regimes from domestic backlash. This disconnect raises questions about its legitimacy as normalization persists in leaving the Palestinian question unaddressed and the group although pledges support to Palestine development there is a lack of any mechanism to translate such cooperation.¹⁸

From the Israeli side it is trading Palestinian land concessions for recognition and strategic partnerships allowing the government to consolidate power without any major sacrifices.¹⁹ The Negev forum is challenged by the ongoing Gaza war and Israel's settler expansion policies. This undermines the forum's moderate rhetoric and weakens the confidence in the durability of this normalization. Progress also stalled in the forum after the Israel promoted settler plans and extreme policies which contributed to the summits postponement.²⁰

Arab regimes have increasingly prioritized regime security, economic diversification, and high-tech development and Gulf states view the Negev Forum not merely as a diplomatic end but as a functional coalition that accelerates modernization by leveraging Israeli technology, capital inflows, and regional legitimacy. The Abraham Accords and Negev cooperation thus

¹⁷Itiraf Remawi, *An Alliance Under Threat: The Abraham Accords Between Israeli Ambitions and Gulf Reservations*, INST. FOR PALESTINE STUD. (Aug. 25, 2025), <https://www.palestine-studies.org/en/node/1655088>.

¹⁸ Gerald M. Feierstein & Yoel Guzansky, *A Mixed Report Card: The Abraham Accords at Three*, MIDDLE EAST INST. (Sept. 15, 2023), <https://www.mei.edu/publications/mixed-report-card-abraham-accords-three>.

¹⁹ Dana El Kurd, *The Paradox of Peace: The Impact of Normalization with Israel on the Arab World*, 3 GLOBAL STUD. Q. 1 (2023).

²⁰ Feierstein & Guzansky, *supra* note 19.

mark a shift away from pan-Arab ideology. Rather than unified commitment to Palestine, these states are choosing pragmatic, interest-based partnerships that safeguard their political survival and economic futures. The alliance redefines regional relationships framing Iran as the threat and sidelining the Palestinian cause when inconvenient.²¹

The Negev Forum is part of a broader U.S. strategy to construct a new regional security architecture linking Israel and Arab partners under American leadership. The working groups and coordination mechanisms were developed within a U.S. made framework, making Washington the principal agenda setter. There is also uncertainty about the longevity of the U.S. commitment which pushes regional states to engage more deeply in U.S.-backed multilateral formats rather than alternatives.²²

Thus, while the Negev Forum is hailed as a diplomatic achievement, it normalizes Israel without resolving the Palestinian issue, which shields Arab regimes from public dissent, and reflects a realpolitik shift that privileges interests over longer-term regional justice.

Unlike I2U2, which is geoeconomic, the Negev Forum is geopolitical and tied to normalization. But both frameworks anchor U.S. technological and security primacy and go above broad Arab consensus into prioritizing functionalism over ideological solidarity.

E. Critical Analysis

a. Minilateralism as an instrument of renewed U.S. Hegemony

I2U2 and the Negev Forum must be understood not only as pragmatic platforms post- Arab Spring state priorities regime survival, economic diversification, infrastructure led modernization and security cooperation but also a new phase of U.S. regional hegemony. Rather than relying on military deployments or formal multilateral institutions, Washington is increasingly leveraging flexible minilateral frameworks through which it exerts its strategic influence in fragmented Middle East.

The weakening of regional institutions such as Arab League has been criticized inability to make decisions or security or conflict resolution appears ineffective in restoring order or

²¹ Remawi, *supra* note 18.

²² Sanam Vakil & Neil Quilliam, *The Abraham Accords and Israel-UAE Normalization*, CHATHAM HOUSE (2021), <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2021/08/abraham-accords-and-israel-uae-normalization>.

generating collective strategic frameworks. The GCC has experienced internal division like the Qatar- Saudi rift undermining its potential as coherent security bloc.

These forums minimize formal institution structures which offers the United States flexibility and helps them in avoiding rigidity of large bureaucracies. This allows for issue specific cooperations without ceding control to multilateral processes.²³

Although economic in nature these minilateral carry latent security functions. Infrastructure projects tie member states more deeply into one another and reduce friction that builds interdependence. These forums permit coordination that complements U.S. strategic priorities such as logistics and supply chain. The United States exports its normative framework through high tech cooperation. Broader I2U2 agenda includes cyber, data and advanced technology which is not only critical for economic returns but also an anchor to U.S. aligned governance in these spheres²⁴.

I2U2 and Negev Forum emerge as instruments of renewed American hegemony in a transformed form wherein the United States may use economic tools such as connectivity, infrastructure, and technological collaboration to maintain influence, U.S. strategy emphasizes on partnerships, deterrence, and diplomacy through minilaterals like I2U2 and the Negev Forum.²⁵

b. Regional Rival Axes That Limit U.S. Centric Minilateralism

The regional context in I2U2 and Negev Forum operate remains highly contested with multiple power centres challenging the U.S. led alignment-

Iran continues to project influence via its network of Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, and Yemen shaping a rival “axis of resistance” that competes with U.S. backed alliances. The axis undermines any unipolar U.S. design ensuring that minilaterals like I2U2 and Negev must function in a security competitive environment.

²³ Jean-Loup Samaan, *The Minilateral Moment in the Middle East: An Opportunity for US Regional Policy?*, ATLANTIC COUNCIL (July 2023), <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/report/the-minilateral-moment-in-the-middle-east>.

²⁴ Soliman, *supra* note 12.

²⁵ Narayanappa Janardhan & Gedaliah Afterman, *U.S. Leans on Economic Strategy to Achieve Geopolitical Ends in the Middle East and Asia*, AGSIW (June 6, 2023), <https://agsiw.org/u-s-leans-on-economic-strategy-to-achieve-geopolitical-ends-in-the-middle-east-and-asia>.

Turkish Neo- Ottoman Activism- Turkey combines military with economic and diplomatic activism. It maintains strategic autonomy while engaging with both Gulf States and Israel adds complexity to the minilateral architecture preventing a fully U.S. dominated bloc.

Qatar diplomacy has pursued an independent foreign policy by engaging with Islamist movements, maintaining ties with Iran, and acting as a mediator in regional conflicts. Its unwillingness to fully align with U.S. Gulf or anti-Iran blocs highlights how minilateral forums like I2U2 do not represent all Arab States.

Saudi Arabia vision 2030 strategic ambitions with its emphasis on economic diversification and modern infrastructure, aligns in some parts with goal of I2U2. However, Riyadh cautious and conditional approach to Israel and hedging with Iran shows that it has not yet fully subsumed under U.S. led Minilateralism.

China's Belt and Road Initiative is rapidly increasing China's footprint in the Middle East. Chinese investments in ports, logistics and energy challenge U.S. influence by offering non-western infrastructure alternatives. China's Silk Road strategy faces governance and coordination challenges in MENA but nonetheless offers a substantial geoeconomic counterweight to U.S. led minilaterals.²⁶ China deepening its ties with Iran under BRI illustrating how China leverages infrastructure to cultivate strategic partnerships.²⁷

Iran's resistance network, Turkey's strategic autonomy, Qatar's independent mediation, Saudi hedging, and China's BRI collectively prevent a U.S. centric bloc from forming. Minilateralism therefore emerges in a competitive environment rather than a unipolar one.

c. Erosion of Multilateralism as a Catalyst for Minilateral Frameworks

The weakening of regional institutions and their inability to make decisions on security or conflict resolution appears ineffective in restoring order or generating collective strategic frameworks.

²⁶ Mordechai Chaziza, *Geopolitical and Geoeconomic Challenges to China's Silk Road Strategy in the Middle East*, MIDDLE EAST INST. (June 9, 2020), <https://www.mei.edu/publications/geopolitical-and-geoeconomic-challenges-chinas-silk-road-strategy-middle-east>.

²⁷ Mohammadreza Mohammadi et al., *The Geoeconomic Impacts of China's Belt and Road Initiative on Iran: Benefits and Challenges*, 2 DISCOVER GLOBAL SOC'Y 1 (2025).

Minilateral structures like I2U2 and Negev forum fill this void by offering issue specific solution. These frameworks provide for avoiding heavy bureaucracy, ideological flexibility and slow consensus building of traditional multilateral organizations. This format allows them to focus on pragmatic domains such as food security, energy efficiency, logistics and health.

Thus, I2U2 is less about domination in the classical sense and more about structuring the regional order around U.S. friendly high value domains.

d. Structural Risks and Contradictions Within Minilateralism

Yet there are limitations to this model by privileging subsets of states such as Israel, UAE, India and Egypt and excluding others such as Qatar or Saudi Arabia these forums risk deepening diplomatic divides in the Arab world.

Although economic integration with Israel is deepened through these forums but political reconciliation especially with regards to Israel and Palestinian question is absent. These minilaterals deliver infrastructure and investment but do not acknowledge historical grievances or structural injustice. This legitimizes normalization without justice.

These minilaterals rely significantly on U.S. convening power, technology and diplomacy and their stability may be compromised if Washington decided to shift its priorities. These competing axes showcase that I2U2, and Negev are part of an architecture where U.S. influence is contested, making the minilaterals both a response to fragmentation and strategy for reasserting control.

Thus, I2U2 and the Negev Forum represent more than functional cooperation, they are part of a realigned U.S. hegemonic strategy which leverages light, flexible minilateral architecture to project American influence in a fractured Middle East. While they fill a gap created by the decline of traditional regional bodies like the Arab League and GCC, they also risk reinforcing fragmentation, cementing a normalized but unresolved relationship with Israel, and perpetuating dependency on U.S. centric institutions.

F. Alternative Perspective

Middle East is now entering a post American but not Anti-American order wherein there is a shift away from exclusive U.S. dominance but not outright hostility to Washington. Traditional

U.S. partners such as Saudi Arabia and UAE that are no longer satisfied with Washington's attempt to create exclusive, U.S. led blocs. They seek partnerships with various powers such as India, China, Russia and the United States.²⁸

This is especially visible in the behaviour of Gulf states that is Saudi Arabia and the UAE that have pursued BRICS signalling their desire to link with rising powers and maintain deep ties with the west.²⁹ They also participate in institutions like the AIIB and have cooperated on oil with Russia which reflect strategic autonomy rather than ideological alignment.³⁰

The UAE embodies this multi alignment approach despite being a partner in I2U2 it has simultaneously cultivated robust relationships with China in infrastructure, trade and security and diplomatic engagement with Iran.³¹ These engagements across diverse geopolitical axes illustrate a deliberate and empirically grounded strategy of multi alignment. States rather than choosing sides are positioning themselves as pivotal actors in a more fluid in a networked order.

This behaviour by Gulf states corresponds “hedging,” where states diversify partnerships to avoid over-dependence. The Gulf's outreach to BRICS, China's technology, and Russia's energy politics provides evidence of this multi-alignment strategy. This produces an order where states optimise benefits by engaging multiple power centres without exclusive alignment.

Thus, the emerging regional order cannot be understood solely through the lens of U.S. dominance but rather through the strategic multi-alignment of Gulf states.

G. Conclusion

The rise of I2U2 and the Negev Forum signals transition in the evolution of Middle Eastern regional order. These frameworks showcase emergence of function and interest-based coalitions centred on economic, technological and security pragmatism. Unlike the nationalist

²⁸ Jennifer Kavanagh & Frederic Wehrey, *The Multialigned Middle East*, FOREIGN AFF. (July 17, 2023), <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/middle-east/multialigned-middle-east>.

²⁹ Nikolay E. Mladenov, *The UAE's BRICS Membership and the Global Role of Middle Powers*, NUS-MIDDLE EAST INST. (Sept. 4, 2023), <https://mei.nus.edu.sg/publications/the-uaes-brics-membership-and-the-global-role-of-middle-powers>.

³⁰ Mihaela Papa & Zhen Han, *The Evolution of Soft Balancing in Informal Institutions: The Case of BRICS*, 68 INT'L STUD. Q. 1 (2025).

³¹ Shahram Akbarzadeh & Arif Saba, *China's Soft Power: Views from Saudi Arabia and the UAE*, 5 GLOBAL STUD. Q. 1 (2024).

and ideological alignment of Nasserism, the pan-Arabism of Ba'athist projects, or security-first orientation of earlier GCC-led frameworks, these new frameworks are rooted in infrastructural diplomacy and built around supply chains, investment corridors, ports, food and water security mechanisms, and project implementation rather than common political vision. Their logic is to secure survival, attract capital, and manage volatility within fragmented post-Arab Spring politics.

This reflects a shift from ideology to transaction wherein cooperation is increasingly used rather than universal declarations. States participate in multiple overlapping arrangements placing flexibility over bloc discipline. This fits an environment wherein multi alignment over binary choice and where power exercised as a network rather than having Hegemone.

However, the sustainability of this framework remains unstable. If the United States were to retreat further from this region these minilateral frameworks may lack the politics and security that they rely on. If institutionalized, they could evolve into foundational blocks of post ideological Middle Eastern regional architecture that is adaptive and more reflective of states priorities rather than the previous generation of Arab regionalism.

Thus, while I2U2 and the Negev Forum represent innovative functional cooperation, they remain partially embedded within U.S.-shaped economic and technological ecosystems. Their future durability depends on whether the United States sustains its overarching power or whether multi-alignment dilutes the centrality of American leadership. Ultimately, minilaterals such as I2U2 and the Negev Forum illustrate that while the Middle East is drifting toward a fragmented, post-ideological order, U.S. structural power continues to remain deeply embedded in the underlying economic and technological architecture of these groups.