

Structural Shifts and Regional Security: A View from Israel

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ABSTRACT

Israel is still holding to its traditional security maxim. Based on a perception of a hostile region, Israel's response includes early warning, deterrence and swift – including pre-emptive – military action, coupled with an alliance with a global power, the US. Israel is adjusting these maxims to a changing reality. Overlapping interests – and perhaps the prospect of an even more open conflict with Iran – led to limited relationships between Israel and some Gulf states. These, however, will be constrained until Israel makes progress on the Palestine issue. Israel aligned with Greece and Cyprus around energy and security, which may lead to conflict with Turkey. Russia's deployment in Syria placed new constraints on Israeli freedom of action there. The US's retrenchment from the Middle East is not having a direct effect on Israel, while the Trump administration's support for Israel's territorial designs in the West Bank may make it easier for Israel to permanently expand there, thus sowing the seeds for future instability in Israel/Palestine. The EU could try and balance against such developments, but, as seen from Israel, is too divided to have a significant impact.

Israel foreign policy | Middle East | US foreign policy | Russia | Iran | Saudi Arabia | Greece | Cyprus | Natural gas | Eastern Mediterranean

keywords

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1. Introduction: Israel's traditional security maxims

Israel is arguably the most powerful state in the Middle East militarily. At the heart of its concept of national security is the perception that the region as a whole rejects Israel's legitimacy and that only military might can protect against these threats.¹ Peace accords, such as the ones Israel has with its former foes Egypt and Jordan, are understood to have been achieved and secured by Israeli deterrence. Israel's long-term hope is that constant Arab failure to breach the "Iron Wall" will lead to a fundamental change in the Arab world which will allow true acceptance of a largely Jewish state in the Middle East.² Israel sees its general strategy as defensive and intended to provide security, deter its foes and delay confrontation.³ Therefore, the changes that have occurred in Israeli strategy over the years – including the ones analysed in this paper – usually reflect a response to global and regional changes, rather than a new agenda developed internally.

In achieving the defensive/responsive strategic goal, Israel professed to adopt an offensive military approach. Historically, the offensive proclivity was a result of the country's natural constraints: small territory and limited manpower. Under these conditions, military operations should be short (as much of the military force is

¹ Charles D. Freilich, *Israeli National Security. A New Strategy for an Era of Change*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2018; Zeev Maoz, *Defending the Holy Land. A Critical Analysis of Israel's Security & Foreign Policy*, Ann Arbor, Michigan University Press, 2006.

² These ideas were articulated in a 1923 piece by the founding father of Zionism's right wing, Ze'ev Jabotinsky, but were adopted by his foe and the founding father of Israel, David Ben Gurion. They continue to guide Israeli thinking on the matter. Vladimir Jabotinsky, "The Iron Wall", in *The Jewish Herald*, 26 November 1937 (first published in *Rassviet*, 4 November 1923), <http://en.jabotinsky.org/archive/search-archive/item/?itemId=158379>.

³ Israel Defense Force, *The Strategy of the Israel Defense Force* (in Hebrew), April 2018, p. 11-12, <https://www.idf.il/media/34416/strategy.pdf>.

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· Paper produced in the framework of the FEPS-IAI project "Fostering a New Security Architecture in the Middle East", April 2020. Copyright © 2020 Foundation for European Progressive Studies (FEPS) and Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI).

based on reservists) and conducted on enemy territory. Supported by an effective early warning system, this approach was translated to a preference for taking the initiative, including pre-emptive strikes.⁴ Another traditional pillar of Israel's strategy (and indeed, of the Zionist movement before it) is the securing of an alliance with a great power. Since the late 1960s the United States has been Israel's ally. Though these maxims remain in force, recent changes in the international, regional and internal arenas are leading to some adjustments in Israeli foreign and security strategy.

Despite Israel's strength it has by and large refrained from participating in any significant effort to shape the region's security architecture. This was, at least to some extent, the result of the fact that many of the regional alliances and political arrangements were actually directed against it.⁵ Alliances that were directed at other parties – such as the 1955 Bagdad Pact, an uneasy anti-Soviet alliance between Iraq, Iran, Pakistan, Turkey and the United Kingdom (UK)⁶ – deliberately shunned Israel.⁷ For a long time, keeping Israel at arm's length from any regional alliance was also the approach followed by the United States (US). During the 1991 Gulf war against Saddam Hussein's Iraq, the George H.W. Bush administration deliberately kept Israel out of the international coalition it assembled to reverse Iraq's occupation of Kuwait.⁸ The US also made sure that Israel did not fall under the area of operations of its US Central Command Middle East (CENTCOM), since the organisation is entrusted with developing and directing coalitional operation with regional allies. Israel, on its part, avoided joining regional security initiatives that it deemed contrary to its security interests, such as the establishment of a Middle East nuclear weapons free zone.⁹ Israel's "otherness" in the region is arguably part of the explanation. A mostly Jewish state, embedded within a large Arab and Muslim space and deemed by many in the region a colonial implant that should be removed, Israel had long struggled with regional isolation and military threats.

Regional alliances were not part of Israel's foundational security maxims. In the rare cases when Israel did create some long-standing "quasi-alliances" with regional actors – such as the close relationship with Iran and Turkey in the late 1950s (the periphery doctrine) – relationships were mostly clandestine and limited in nature.¹⁰

⁴ Charles D. Freilich, *Israeli National Security*, cit.; Zeev Maoz, *Defending the Holy Land*, cit.

⁵ J S F. Parker, "The United Arab Republic", in *International Affairs*, Vol. 38, No. 1 (January 1962), p. 16.

⁶ The alliance floundered after the 1958 revolution in Iraq and formally folded after the 1979 revolution in Iran.

⁷ "Israel Issue Raised at Baghdad Pact Conference; Iraq Voices Threat", in *JTA Daily News Bulletin*, Vol. 22, No. 225 (22 November 1955), <https://www.jta.org/?p=761061>.

⁸ The US tried to keep Israel away from any participation in the alliance with Arab states against Iraq. Aware of this, Iraq tried to provoke Israel by shelling it with ballistic missiles. The Iraqis were hoping that an Israeli response would force Washington's Arab allies to leave the anti-Iraqi coalition.

⁹ Reuters, "Netanyahu Thanks US for Blocking Push for Middle East Nuclear Arms Ban", in *The Guardian*, 23 May 2015, <https://gu.com/p/49724>; Arms Control Association, "WMD-Free Middle East Proposal at a Glance", in *ACA Fact Sheets*, last reviewed: December 2018, <https://www.armscontrol.org/node/4705>.

¹⁰ Yossi Alpher, *Periphery. Israel's Search for Middle East Allies*, Lanham, Rowman & Littlefield, 2015.

Even at its peak, however, the doctrine was not a central pillar of Israeli strategy.

2. Israel in a changing regional reality: immediate threats and responses

2.1 Traditional threats are gone

Although Israel still holds to its basic security maxims, the conditions in the region have changed. First, the traditional threat from neighbouring states was replaced by concerns about Iran, Hezbollah and Hamas. Until the late 1980s, Israel's immediate neighbours – Egypt, Syria and Jordan – were perceived to pose the most significant threat, supported by the “second circle” Arab nations, such as Iraq and Libya.¹¹ Starting in the late 1970s, major neighbouring Arab states began to abandon their hostility. First Egypt (1979) and then Jordan (1994) signed a peace accord with Israel. Syria, Lebanon and Israel were engaged in (fruitless) peace talks during the 1990s and 2000s. The US invasion of Iraq in 2003 removed the latter as a threat, and the collapse of the Syrian state in the civil war solidified Israel's sense that conventional threats posed by neighbouring states are largely gone.

2.2 Current threats and responses: Iran, Hezbollah and the Palestinians

With the state threat largely gone, Israel – as reflected in public discourse¹² and leadership statements – has come to view Iran and Hezbollah, the Shiite Lebanese armed group that Iran helped create and sustain after the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982, as the main threats. The Iranian threat is a sub-category of the broader Israeli fear that a regional actor will acquire a nuclear weapon.¹³ With the shadow of the holocaust, many Israelis (though probably not the security elite) believe that once Iran has the bomb, it will use it against them.¹⁴ Others fear a cascading effect that will destabilise the region, by pushing such actors as Saudi Arabia, Turkey or Egypt to seek nuclear weapons. A third concern is that a nuclear-armed Iran and its allies, such as Hezbollah, will be emboldened to challenge Israel.¹⁵ Beyond the bomb, Israel does not want Iran to gain a foothold close to its borders, particularly in Syria, where Israel and Iran have engaged in multiple military exchanges, both

¹¹ Over the years, numerous Arab states that do not share a border with Israel, such as Iraq, Morocco, Saudi Arabia, Algeria and Kuwait have deployed elements of their armed forces to support combat operations against Israel.

¹² “Iran Top of Mind as Israelis Head to the Polls ... Again”, in *BRINK*, 28 February 2020, <http://www.brinknews.com/Y8I>.

¹³ Hence the “Begin Doctrine” which led to Israeli attack on reactors in Iraq (1981) and Syria (2007).

¹⁴ In a 2012 poll, 61 per cent of Israelis believed that if Iran acquires a nuclear weapon it will use it against Israel, and 77 per cent believed that Iran is an existential threat to Israel. Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs (JCPA), “Poll: 77 Percent of Israelis See Iran Nukes as Existential Threat”, in *Jerusalem Issue Briefs*, Vol. 12, No. 4 (27 March 2012), <https://jcpa.org/?p=30624>.

¹⁵ Ehud Eiran and Martin B. Malin, “The Sum of all Fears: Israel's Perception of a Nuclear-Armed Iran”, in *The Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 36, No. 3 (Summer 2013), p. 77-89, <https://www.csis.org/node/27293>.

directly and involving Iran's proxies in both Syria and Lebanon. This latter concern ties back to the fear that Iran will acquire nuclear capability. Seen from Israel, such capability would increase Iran's regional influence and power, and could limit that of Israel and its global and regional partners.

Israel encouraged the US to withdraw, in May 2018, from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), the nuclear deal signed in July 2015 by Iran, the US and a group of other powers (China, France, Germany, Russia, the UK and the European Union). Israel also continued with a clandestine effort to curb the Iranian nuclear project, such as the 2018 operation to bring to Israel the archive of the Islamic Republic's nuclear programme.¹⁶ For now, Israeli efforts have not achieved the desired results of curbing Iran's nuclear activities to a greater extent than the JCPOA had foreseen. Teheran is slowly relaunching parts of its nuclear programme and may thus gradually move closer to acquiring nuclear weapons capability.¹⁷

Israel is further trying to curtail Iran's regional influence, especially in Syria, Lebanon and Iraq. Israel's response, including military actions, has escalated over time. Initially, Israel conducted attacks against Iranian agents and proxies only in Syria, and kept them secret. By 2019, however, Israeli leaders began talking openly about its activities, made assertive public statements¹⁸ and expanded the reach of Israeli military operations to Lebanon and Iraq. Iran's decision to restart nuclear activities suspended under the JCPOA following the US withdrawal from the agreement, alongside Israel's willingness to forcefully confront Iran in the region, suggests further instability may soon come about, including possibly a more open Israeli-Iranian clash. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu stated in December 2019 that "Iran's aggression is growing, but its empire is tottering. And I say let's make it totter even further".¹⁹ Later that month, Israel might have been involved in a cyber-attack²⁰ on Iranian financial institutions.²¹ The severity of the tension will be

¹⁶ David E. Sanger and Ronen Bergman, "How Israel, in Dark of Night, Torched Its Way to Iran's Nuclear Secrets", in *The New York Times*, 15 July 2020, <https://nyti.ms/2NP3JOW>.

¹⁷ A March 2020 report by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) revealed that Teheran has by now a stockpile of over 1,000 kg of uranium, which would bring it closer to developing a nuclear weapon. Iran is also refusing access to international inspectors to some sites that are suspected of being part of the nuclear programme. See IAEA, *Verification and Monitoring in the Islamic Republic of Iran in Light of United Nations Security Council Resolution 2231 (2015)*, 3 March 2020, p. 6, <https://www.iaea.org/sites/default/files/20/03/gov2020-5.pdf>; Nicole Jawerth, "IAEA Director General Calls on Iran to Cooperate Immediately and Fully", in *IAEA News*, 9 March 2020, <https://www.iaea.org/node/81079>.

¹⁸ Or Heller, "IDF MID Recommends Increased Attacks Against Iran in Syria", in *Israel Defense*, 15 January 2020, <https://www.israeldefense.co.il/en/node/41630>.

¹⁹ US Department of State, *Secretary Michael R. Pompeo and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu Before Their Meeting*, 4 December 2019, <https://www.state.gov/secretary-michael-r-pompeo-and-israeli-prime-minister-benjamin-netanyahu-before-their-meeting>.

²⁰ Farnaz Fassihi and Ronen Bergman, "Iran Says It Was Hit with 'Very Big' Cyberattack", in *The New York Times*, 12 December 2019, <https://nyti.ms/2PJ4NWF>.

²¹ "Iran's Banks Were Hacked, Minister Admits, But Experts Doubt His Claimed Culprit", in *The Times of Israel*, 11 December 2019, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/irans-banks-were-hacked-minister-admits-but-experts-doubt-his-claimed-culprit>.

affected, to some extent, by internal Israeli political developments. In particular, it will depend on the space that is allotted to the issue by Prime Minister Netanyahu, who made it a central part of his claim for internal legitimacy. If he vacates the political stage, following his legal complications (or for any other reasons), there is a greater chance that Israeli leaders will at least make less of a public effort to keep the tension with Iran on the agenda. The coronavirus crisis may also mitigate the risk of such a clash, as both parties are focusing their attention on the internal public health challenge. Moreover, Israel has made clear over the years that its conflict is with the regime, not the Iranian people, and so it is likely to avoid public messages and acts that might be interpreted as threatening the public in Iran in its moment of crisis.

Hezbollah is seen by Israel as a threat very much related to the Iran one. While the organisation supported the regime of President Bashar al-Assad in Syria, it also continued its build-up of capabilities against Israel. While Israeli security leadership assumes that Hezbollah has no plans for a confrontation with Israel in the short term, it is taking measures to limit the group's capabilities by attacking weapons supplies, mostly in Syria, and by buttressing defences on its northern borders.²²

The second major challenge facing Israel is the Palestinian issue. Israel controls the West Bank, although it shares power over parts of it with the Palestinian Authority (PA). The two cooperate, to some extent, on security matters. The Gaza Strip, by contrast, is controlled by Hamas, an Islamist armed group that emerged in the 1980s and takes a much harder line towards Israel, clashing militarily with it a number of times over the last 12 years (2008–09, 2012, 2014). Many Israelis see the Palestinian goal – both the public's goal and that of its political elite – as intending to destroy Israel, while others understand it to be directed against the Israeli occupation in the West Bank and its control of the Gaza Strip.

Israel's current strategy towards the Palestinians is to move slowly towards the incorporation of portions of the West Bank into Israel proper while keeping Palestinian armed groups, most notably Hamas, at bay. The internal split in the Palestinian national movement between Hamas and the PA, which is controlled by the secular nationalist Fatah party, makes the task easier. Israel's relations with the PA are fraught with tensions. Israeli officials blame the PA, on occasion, for incitement to violence against Israeli settlers.²³ Conversely, the PA criticises Israel for settlement expansion and other actions. Israel is also concerned by some of the efforts the PA is mounting against it in the international arena, such as a possible

²² Interview with Maj. Gen. (res.) Gershon Hacohen: "Hezbollah's Commando Might Occupy Villages in the Galilee" (in Hebrew), in *Maariv*, 27 August 2019, <https://www.maariv.co.il/news/military/Article-715808>.

²³ For example: "Israeli Minister: Abbas 'Inciting Murder of Jews'", in *BBC News*, 16 October 2015, <https://www.bbc.com/news/av/world-34549221>; "Israeli Leaders Accuse Abbas of Inciting Violence; PM Says: 'It Won't Help You'", in *The Times of Israel*, 6 February 2020, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/israeli-leaders-accuse-abbas-of-inciting-violence-pm-says-it-wont-help-you>.

investigation by the International Criminal Court of Israeli actions in the West Bank.²⁴ It remains to be seen if Israel will indeed move forward with these plans, as the government coalition Prime Minister Netanyahu's is negotiating for at the time of writing will probably include the more moderate Blue and White party.

The European Union has tried to balance against Israel's designs on the West Bank, remaining steadfast in its support for a two-state framework and the illegality of Israeli settlements, refusing to endorse the Trump administration's policies vis-à-vis Israel and the Palestinians. Meanwhile, the EU has continued to pursue other initiatives, and in line with its differentiation policy, has sought to ensure that EU states and institutions as well as Israel abide by EU rules and regulations, including the exclusion of Israeli settlements and goods produced in settlements from the EU-Israel Association Agreement and preferential tax treatments allotted to Israeli goods imported to the EU. This has entailed EU efforts to enforce stricter labelling of products made in Israeli settlements and the inclusion of differentiation clauses that exclude the Palestinian territories from the remit of EU-Israel bilateral agreements.²⁵ Being mostly legal and institutional in nature, these steps have had no noticeable effect on Israeli policy, however. Either way, seen from Israel, the EU is occupied with its own internal challenges, and its diplomatic power projection was weakening even before the coronavirus crisis.

The Palestinian question is tied to regional power questions. The confrontation with Iran has opened previously non-existent avenues for engaging Arab states that also see Iran as a threat to their interests, especially Saudi Arabia. However, there it is uncertain whether the Palestinian issue could be overshadowed by this broader geopolitical logic as Arabs states do not want to be seen as too close to Israel unless the Palestine issue is settled.

3. Israel and major structural regional security issues

Israel's approach to the region is further driven by larger structural issues: US retrenchment, Russia's newish involvement or "return" to the Middle East, the Sunni-Shia competition and the significance of energy resources in the Eastern Mediterranean.

²⁴ The ICC investigation is also expected to include a review of Hamas' attacks on Israeli civilians.

²⁵ See for instance, Hugh Lovatt, "EU Differentiation and the Push for Peace in Israel-Palestine", in *ECFR Policy Briefs*, 31 October 2016, https://www.ecfr.eu/publications/summary/eu_differentiation_and_the_push_for_peace_in_israel_palestine7163. Also see, AP, "Products from Israeli Settlements Must Be Labelled, EU Court Rules", in *The Guardian*, 12 November 2019, <https://gu.com/p/cya73>.

3.1 American retrenchment

Since the late 1960s, Israel and the United States have been close allies.²⁶ Even though no formal treaty of alliance has been signed between the two, there are dozens of agreements²⁷ that have formalised significant aspects of the relationship, such as Memorandums of Understanding signed in 1975,²⁸ 1981²⁹ and 2016.³⁰ Since 1988 Israel has been designated by the US as a major non-NATO ally.³¹ The US offers diplomatic support for Israel in many international fora and provides security assistance in the form of funds and weapons.³² The 2016 MoU ensured generous support of 3.8 billion US dollars for a decade.³³

Starting with the Barack Obama administration, however, the United States has signalled its intention to decrease its involvement in the Middle East. This approach reflects weariness in Washington regarding long and unsuccessful military engagements in the region, particularly in Afghanistan and Iraq. Declines in reliance on energy sources from the Middle East, and the diminished perception of a terrorist threat, as well as the rise of China and President Donald Trump's isolationist instincts, have further contributed to the attempt to limit exposure and refocus away from the region. Despite this aspiration, however, for now the US is still very much involved. It supports its Arab allies, mostly in the Gulf, and maintains bases in the region. There are some 60,000 troops in the region as of early 2020.³⁴ Washington's prior commitments to its allies, new security risks that have emerged over time (such as the Islamic State) and maybe path dependency all mean that the US has not disengaged and may well not disengage any time soon.

²⁶ Uri Bialer, *Israeli Foreign Policy. A People Shall Not Dwell Alone*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 2020, p. 254-281.

²⁷ Jewish Virtual Library, *U.S.-Israel Relations: Formal Agreements (1950 - Present)*, <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/formal-agreements-between-us-and-israel>.

²⁸ US and Israel, *Memorandum of Agreement Between the Governments of Israel and the United States*, 1 September 1975, <https://www.fordlibrarymuseum.gov/library/document/0331/1553991.pdf>.

²⁹ Bernard Gwertzman, "U.S. and Israel Sign Strategic Accord to Counter Soviet", in *The New York Times*, 1 December 1981, <https://nyti.ms/29LfbZ4>.

³⁰ White House, *Fact Sheet: Memorandum of Understanding Reached with Israel*, 14 September 2016, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2016/09/14/fact-sheet-memorandum-understanding-reached-israel>.

³¹ US and Israel, *Memorandum of Agreement between the United States of America and the State of Israel Regarding Joint Political, Security, and Economic Cooperation*, 21 April 1988, <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/u-s-israel-memorandum-of-agreement-on-security-cooperation-april-1988>.

³² Israel is the biggest recipient of US financial support in history (mostly, in funds appropriated for buying US-made arms). By 2019, the United States had provided Israel 142.3 billion US dollars (current, or non-inflation-adjusted, dollars). See: Jeremy M. Sharp, "U.S. Foreign Aid to Israel", in *CRS Reports*, No. RL33222 (7 August 2019), <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/mideast/RL33222.pdf>.

³³ White House, *Fact Sheet: Memorandum of Understanding Reached with Israel*, cit.

³⁴ Rashaan Ayes, "Where U.S. Troops and Military Assets Are Deployed in the Middle East", in *Axios*, updated 8 January 2020, <https://www.axios.com/where-us-troops-deployed-middle-east-5e96fdb2-c7ba-4f26-90b4-7bf452f83847.html>.

For the time being, any signalling of US retrenchment has had only marginal effect on Israel. There was some concern about shifting US policies during the Obama era, as the then US president was critical of Israeli settlement activity, while his Secretary of State John Kerry was trying to mediate a deal between Israel and the Palestinians. Jerusalem was further concerned that the 2015 JCPOA deal with Iran reflected American naiveté and would strengthen Tehran in the region. President Trump, on the other hand, offered public support to a number of Israeli positions about territorial questions that were generally unacceptable to the international community. In December 2017, the US recognised Jerusalem as Israel's capital,³⁵ and moved its embassy there in May 2018.³⁶ In March 2019, Washington recognised Israel's sovereignty over the Golan Heights, a region Israel occupied from Syria in 1967.³⁷ The US further changed its position regarding Israeli settlements in the West Bank by stating that they were "not per se illegal under international law".³⁸ Finally, in January 2020, the US offered a blueprint to resolve the Arab–Israeli conflict, called a "vision for peace" (or in its popular name: the deal of the century) under which Israel will retain some 30 per cent of the occupied West Bank, including all of its settlements.³⁹

US support for Israeli territorial expansion is expected to lead to a change in Israeli designs for the West Bank. Israel holds this occupied region under a separate temporary military regime. Although most of Israel's right-wing parties and many of their supporters wanted to extend Israeli sovereignty there, the political leadership was concerned over the years that this blatant breach of international norms⁴⁰ would lead the international community to penalise it. Moreover, Israel's centre-left parties and many of their supporters oppose the move. However, the dramatic change in the US position has made it easier for a right-wing Israeli government to proceed with annexing parts of the West Bank to Israel. Such a move will not be immanent. In the immediate aftermath of the presentation of the US peace plan, close aides to President Trump, such as Jared Kushner, urged Israel not to move forward with annexation.⁴¹ Prime Minister Netanyahu suggested in early

³⁵ White House, *Statement by President Trump on Jerusalem*, 6 December 2017, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/statement-president-trump-jerusalem>.

³⁶ Amir Tibon and Noa Landau, "U.S. Embassy Move to Jerusalem: Everything You Need to Know", in *Haaretz*, 14 May 2018, <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/premium-1.6062554>.

³⁷ White House, *Proclamation on Recognizing the Golan Heights as Part of the State of Israel*, 25 March 2019, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/proclamation-recognizing-golan-heights-part-state-israel>.

³⁸ US Department of State, *Secretary Michael R. Pompeo Remarks to the Press*, 18 November 2019, <https://www.state.gov/secretary-michael-r-pompeo-remarks-to-the-press>.

³⁹ White House, *Peace to Prosperity. A Vision to Improve the Lives of the Palestinian and Israeli People*, 28 January 2020, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/peacetoprosperty>.

⁴⁰ Boaz Atzili, *Good Fences, Bad Neighbors. Border Fixity and International Conflict*, Chicago/London, University of Chicago Press, 2012.

⁴¹ Steve Hendrix, Ruth Eglash and Anne Gearan, "Jared Kushner Put a Knife 'in Netanyahu's Back' Over Annexation Delay, Says Israeli Settler Leader", in *The Washington Post*, 4 February 2020, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/reports-jared-kushner-angers-netanyahu-camp-by-slowing-annexation-moves/2020/02/04/82376ac6-4719-11ea-91ab-ce439aa5c7c1_story.html.

2020 that Israel would annex the Jordan Valley, while the then Minister of Defence, Naftali Bennett, has been proposing for a few years now that Israel should annex about 60 per cent of the West Bank (equivalent to the so-called "Area C" designated by the Oslo Accords).

US support for Israeli territorial designs holds the seeds of future instability. Should Israel entrench formally into the West Bank, it will most likely institutionalise inequality between its citizens and the 2.9 million Palestinians in the West Bank.⁴² Under these circumstances of structured inequality, "Greater Israel" – the vision held by many on Israel's right to create a Jewish state extending from the Jordan to the Mediterranean – is most likely to face external and internal challenges. Regional and international actors – the Arab World, Russia, China and the EU – are expected to object. However, seen from Israel, the Arab world is busy with its own massive internal strife, and corners of it – mostly in the Gulf – would continue to cooperate with Israel anyway, as their fear of Iran is greater than their commitment to the Palestinians. Russia and China are perceived in Israel as pragmatic actors who respect Israeli power. They are therefore not expected to levy heavy costs on Israel, should it annex the West Bank. The EU – perhaps the most effective and vocal opponent of Israeli expansion (in part, as it is a major trade partner) – is perceived, as noted, as weaker and less effective in the era of Brexit, and the rise of right-wing populism. Indeed, although the EU is trying to balance against US policies regarding Iran and Israeli annexation, this does not seem to affect Israel's approach.

The Trump administration is close to Israel also on account of its unilateral withdrawal from the JCPOA with Iran in May 2018.⁴³ Prime Minister Netanyahu opposed the deal even before it was signed, believing it would allow Iran to eventually develop a military nuclear capability under the cover of a civilian one (which the agreement consented to, although phasing it over the course over two decades at least). The US withdrawal from the accord was in line with the Prime Minister's position, but for now has led to an adverse result for Israelis, as Iran has resumed, as noted, elements of its nuclear programme in response to the re-adoption of sanctions by the US and the inability of the other members of the agreement to provide any financial compensation.⁴⁴ US behaviour towards Iran in the last year sent mixed strategic messages, leading to interchanging periods of concern and elation among Israeli strategists. Israel was deeply concerned by the lack of any substantial support or response for a key regional ally following the Iranian attack on Saudi Arabian oil installations in September 2019. In January 2020, however, Israelis were elated (although they tried to distance themselves)

⁴² Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics website: *Indicators*, <http://www.pcbs.gov.ps/site/881/default.aspx>.

⁴³ White House, *Remarks by President Trump on the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action*, 8 May 2018, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-joint-comprehensive-plan-action>.

⁴⁴ IAEA, *Verification and Monitoring in the Islamic Republic of Iran in Light of United Nations Security Council Resolution 2231 (2015)*, 3 March 2020, cit.

when the US assassinated Qasem Soleimani, the commander of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Al-Quds force and the main strategist behind Iran's policy of building proxies around the region as "deterrence" assets against the enemies of the Islamic Republic.

In general, therefore, Israel does not seem to be concerned about US retrenchment. First, it is not clear that the US is indeed leaving – there are actually more US soldiers in the Middle East now than there were at the start of the Trump presidency. Second, Israelis are rather confident that the alliance with the US is deeply rooted in the US as a domestic agenda item. In any event, ideas of US offshore balancing – i.e., physical withdrawal from the region supplanted by support from afar, in part by way of arms supplies – are very similar to the current US–Israeli structure. Israel has never wanted the deployment of US forces to defend it (nor a formal alliance), among other reasons, for fear that they might constrain its actions.

On the other hand, in the fall of 2019 Israelis were somewhat anxious in face of the surprise announcement by President Trump that the US would withdraw its forces from Syria. Concerns were raised by the mercurial decision-making style of the US president, but perhaps more importantly because of the precedent of the abandonment of the Syrian Kurds, who controlled the area of Syria where US forces operated and who have been the US's main allies against the Islamic State. Israel, which is also a close supporter of Kurdish aspirations, is concerned that elements hostile to Israel, mostly Iran and to a lesser degree Turkey, will replace the US in areas Washington leaves. To some extent, the future of the Israeli–US alliance is affected by internal politics. By early 2021 there might be new leaders in Jerusalem and Washington.

The alliance might also be affected by the trajectory of Israeli–Chinese relations. China – seen in Israel until recently as a faraway (re)emerging giant – has entered Israeli strategic calculations. During the last decade, Israel has been experiencing a wave of Chinese investments and involvement both in Israel's high-tech industries, as well as in infrastructure projects. For example, Chinese investors participated in 12.5 per cent of funding rounds of high-tech companies in Israel in 2018, up from 7.5 per cent in 2015.⁴⁵ Chinese companies are also involved in developing Israel's two large ports in the Mediterranean, Ashdod and Haifa.

The US has begun raising concerns about China's involvement in the port of Haifa and the high-tech scene. Israel, for now, is balancing these competing pressures well. Israel has made no changes to the plans for port development. It did, however, create in October 2019 a committee to vet Chinese investments in high-tech and infrastructure⁴⁶ – although it remains to be seen how effective this body will be.

⁴⁵ Yasmin Yablonko, "Chinese Take Growing Slice of Israeli Tech Investment", in *Globes*, 30 October 2018, <https://en.globes.co.il/en/article-chinese-take-growing-slice-of-israeli-tech-investment-1001258499>.

⁴⁶ Herb Keinon, "Under U.S. Pressure, Israel Okays Mechanism to Oversee Chinese Investments", in *The Jerusalem Post*, 30 October 2018, <https://www.jpost.com/Israel-News/Under-US-pressure->

3.2 Enter Russia

Russia's forceful re-entry into the Middle-East, starting with the 2015 military intervention in support of Syria's President Assad, has limited, to a certain degree, Israel's freedom of action in the region. Russian military capabilities curb Israeli air dominance. Russian military aerial activity in Syrian skies has forced Israel to be more careful in attacking in Syria. For example, in September 2018, Russia blamed an Israeli air-force operation near Syria for having led Syrian forces to accidentally shoot down a Russian spy plane.⁴⁷ Israel had been managing the issue rather well up until then. The Israeli air force and the Russian forces in Syria communicate on a regular basis in an effort to avoid clashes. Following the September 2018 incident, both countries further developed the coordination mechanism.⁴⁸ Russia's involvement in Syria offers, from an Israeli perspective, a possible future check on Iranian activities there. However, despite Russian commitments (as they were understood in Israel) to keep Iranian presence at least 80 kilometres away from Israel's borders, various reports indicate that Iranian presence – mostly through proxies under its command⁴⁹ – is indeed nearer to Israel. Moscow is well placed to become the mediator and possible enforcer of any future security arrangement on Israel's northern front. This reality has forced Israel to invest considerable diplomatic resources into maintaining relations with the Kremlin. Since 2015, Prime Minister Netanyahu has visited Russia seven times. Although the Syria issue has been at the heart of the meetings, the interactions have led to the development of a somewhat broader agenda.

3.3 The Sunni–Shia competition

The third important trend that has affected Israeli regional policies is the Sunni–Shia competition. Israel hardly comments in public about this divide, or the implications it has for the Israeli state. However, there is an overlap in interests between the anti-Iran Sunni camp and Israel. Moreover, some Gulf states follow with concern US proclamations about retrenchment and are seeking alternative support. The result is a growing exchange between Israel and Gulf states. There have been a number of meetings between former senior officials in public fora,⁵⁰ and also a small number of public visits by Saudi delegations to Israel. In January 2020, it emerged that the Israeli minister of the interior had removed some restrictions on travel by Israeli citizens to Saudi Arabia.⁵¹ Saudi Arabia has also made minor

Israel-okays-mechanism-to-oversee-Chinese-investments-606326.

⁴⁷ Barbara Starr and Ryan Browne, "Syria Accidentally Shot Down a Russian Military Plane", in *CNN*, 18 September 2018, <https://edition.cnn.com/2018/09/17/politics/syrian-regime-shoots-down-russian-plane/index.html>.

⁴⁸ Dan Williams, "Israel to Improve Coordination with Moscow Over Syria After Plane Crash", in *Reuters*, 20 September 2018, <https://reut.rs/2xEbK2e>.

⁴⁹ Or Heller, "IDF MID Recommends Increased Attacks Against Iran in Syria", cit.

⁵⁰ J.J. Goldberg, "Top Israeli-Saudi Ex-Spy Chief in Rare Dialogue", in *Forward*, 26 May 2014, <https://forward.com/opinion/198909>.

⁵¹ Noa Landau and Jack Khoury, "Israel Officially Allows Israelis to Travel to Saudi Arabia", in *Haaretz*,

public gestures towards Israel, such as allowing, since 2018, non-Israeli airlines to use its airspace on their way to Israel, an activity that was banned for decades.⁵² There are also reports of Israeli software exports to Saudi Arabia, mostly in the defence realm including possibly surveillance equipment.⁵³ Some experts believe, for example, that the alleged Saudi hacking into the phone of Jeff Bezos in 2019, was conducted using Israeli-made spyware.⁵⁴

Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states are also drawn to the Israeli technology sector as part of their efforts to diversify their economies. For example, Saudi officials and Israeli companies have explored (and are possibly already cooperating) in other high-tech projects, including the construction of the Saudi high-tech city of Neom.⁵⁵

Israel has also strengthened its relations with other Sunni states such as Egypt, Sudan and Morocco. While not confirmed by either party, Israel is apparently helping Egypt combat Islamic State affiliates in the Sinai. According to some reports, between 2015 and January 2018 the Israeli air force intervened more than 100 times in the Egyptian Sinai upon request of the Egyptian government.⁵⁶

For the time being, the scope of these semi-clandestine relationships is limited. Arab governments want to wait for some public display of progress on the Israeli–Palestinian front before they can move to make their relations with Israel more public and formal. Besides, it is far from clear that Sunni (especially Gulf) concerns about Iranian designs, coupled with fear of abandonment by the US, will necessarily be translated into an alliance with Israel. They might bandwagon, i.e., try to appease Iran, rather than confront it. The United Arab Emirates' decision to withdraw from Yemen – where it was conducting a war against Iranian-supported Houthi rebels – in the summer of 2019,⁵⁷ and a less confrontational rhetoric by Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman towards Iran,⁵⁸ are indications that such a policy shift is indeed possible.

26 January 2020, <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/premium-1.8445492>.

⁵² Alexander Cornwell and Ari Rabinovitch, "Indian Airliner Makes History by Flying to Israel Via Saudi Airspace", in *Reuters*, 22 March 2018, <https://reut.rs/2Ge9ODU>.

⁵³ Steven Scheer, "Israeli Surveillance Software Lawsuit Goes Behind Closed Doors", in *Reuters*, 16 January 2020, <https://reut.rs/2QZhcY1>.

⁵⁴ Economist, "Alexa, Define Chutzpah. Hacking Jeff Bezos", in *The Economist*, Vol. 434, No. 9178 (25 January 2020), p. 40.

⁵⁵ Max Schindler, "Israeli Companies Talking to Saudi Arabia about \$500b. 'Smart City'", in *The Jerusalem Post*, 25 October 2017, <https://www.jpost.com/business-and-innovation/israeli-companies-likely-talking-to-saudi-arabia-about-500-bil-smart-city-508429>.

⁵⁶ David D. Kirkpatrick, "Secret Alliance: Israel Carries Out Airstrikes in Egypt, with Cairo's O.K.", in *The New York Times*, 3 February 2018, <https://nyti.ms/2FH2j4a>.

⁵⁷ Declan Walsh and David D. Kirkpatrick, "U.A.E. Pulls Most Forces from Yemen in Blow to Saudi War Effort", in *The New York Times*, 11 July 2019, <https://nyti.ms/32o8UN1>.

⁵⁸ "The Saudi Crown Prince's Shifting Rhetoric on Iran", in *TRT World*, 1 October 2019, <https://www.trtworld.com/magazine/the-saudi-crown-prince-s-shifting-rhetoric-on-iran-30263>.

Both Iran⁵⁹ and Russia⁶⁰ have publicly offered Gulf security arrangements. At least the Iranian offer is – unsurprisingly – accommodating for Iran as it rejects a US presence in the region. These designs may not come to be, but Israel is in no real position to offer any serious support to the Gulf states to oppose these designs. However, Iran’s role in this context should be of some interest to Israel as it affects Iranian behaviour near Israel’s borders. Israeli analysts are expected to debate whether Iran is an inherently revisionist actor that would use a more accommodating Gulf environment to enhance its assertive activities in Syria, Lebanon and Iraq, or whether a satisfaction of Iran’s security needs in the Gulf could diminish the Iranian incentive to support its security through regional activism. Either way, security arrangements for the Gulf do not gain much attention in Israel. Similarly, little attention was paid in Israel, at least in public, to the US vision, floated in 2017, to launch an Arab NATO. This effort may seem to be aligned with Israel’s own interest to contain Iran. However, one can assume that the limited interest in Israel reflects caution about the possibility that such an alliance would actually emerge. And even if it did, it is unclear what military use it would be. Moreover, Israel traditionally prefers bilateral contacts with Arab nations rather than dealing with a wider forum that might get engaged in a “race to the bottom” regarding the relationship with Israel. Israel is always also concerned that such an alliance might become a more effective framework to challenge it, should regimes in Cairo and Riyadh change.

3.4 Energy: Israel and the Hellenic alliance

Beginning in the mid-2010s Israel developed a “quasi-alliance” with Greece and Cyprus.⁶¹ These close relationships include regular meetings of the three heads of state and government: between 2016 and 2020 the leaders have held seven formal meetings.⁶² Similar regular meetings are conducted on the ministerial level and between parliamentarians.⁶³ Israel has signed agreements with Greece (2015) and Cyprus (2016) that have set the legal framework for joint military exercises. In 2017 these agreements were incorporated into Israeli law.⁶⁴ Within this framework, the three countries conduct joint military exercises in each other’s territory. For

⁵⁹ United Nations, “At UN, Iran Proposes ‘Coalition for Hope’ to Pull Gulf Region from ‘Edge of Collapse’”, in *UN News*, 25 September 2019, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2019/09/1047472>.

⁶⁰ “Russia Presents to UN Its Concept of Collective Security in Persian Gulf”, in *TASS*, 30 July 2019, <https://tass.com/world/1070933>.

⁶¹ Zenonas Tziarras, “Israel-Cyprus-Greece: A ‘Comfortable’ Quasi-Alliance”, in *Mediterranean Politics*, Vol. 21, No. 3 (2016), p. 407-427.

⁶² Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *EastMed Gas Pipeline Agreement Signed at Trilateral Summit between PM Benjamin Netanyahu, Greek PM Kyriakos Mitsotakis and Cypriot Pres. Nicos Anastasiades*, 2 January 2020, <https://mfa.gov.il/MFA/PressRoom/2020/Pages/EastMed-Gas-pipeline-agreement-signed-at-trilateral-summit-2-January-2019.aspx>.

⁶³ *Cyprus-Greece-Israel 4th Trilateral Summit Declaration*, 8 May 2018, <https://www.pio.gov.cy/en/press-releases-article.html?id=1656>.

⁶⁴ The laws for the implementation of the status of forces agreements with Cyprus and Greece were published in the Official Gazette No. 2671 of 23 November 2017 (in Hebrew): https://www.nevo.co.il/law_word/Law14/law-2671.pdf.

example, in 2017 Israeli forces participated in joint exercises with Cypriot forces in Cyprus and Greece.⁶⁵

The alliance is driven by the centrality of Mediterranean gas to Israel's economy. Beginning in 1999, significant natural gas discoveries were made in the Levantine basin in both Israeli and Cypriot exclusive economic zones.⁶⁶ By 2018, Israel was producing more than half of its electricity by using gas. Israel, Greece and Cyprus have agreed in principle to export the gas through Greece to Europe,⁶⁷ and are in the early phases of connecting their electricity infrastructure.⁶⁸ There is also commercial cooperation in the energy field.⁶⁹ The gas issue may serve as a basis for the development of a broader regional grouping. In early 2020, Cyprus, Greece and Israel joined an originally Egyptian initiative to create an East Mediterranean Gas Initiative, which also includes Italy, Jordan and the PA.⁷⁰ While focused on a narrow economic issue, the platform can create over time closer relations on other issues. Most notably, possible security cooperation around the gas (and beyond) may evolve. The platform enjoys EU and US support.

The three countries have also grown closer as they share – to different degrees – the assessment of Turkey as a threat. Israel, once a close ally of Turkey, saw its relations with Ankara cool following a new approach in Turkish foreign policy that was seen as hostile to Israel.⁷¹ A 2010 incident in which Israeli forces killed ten Turkish activists who tried to break the maritime blockade on Gaza further strained relations.⁷² Turkey remains close to Hamas in Gaza. According to some reports, Turkey even allows Hamas' military planners to operate on its territory.⁷³

⁶⁵ Judah Ari Gross, "500 Israeli Soldiers Fight Mock War in Cyprus Mountains", in *The Times of Israel*, 15 June 2017, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/500-israeli-soldiers-fight-mock-war-in-cyprus-mountains>; "Cyprus and Israel Hold Joint Military Exercises", in *Cyprus Mail*, 3 December 2017, <https://cyprus-mail.com/?p=158517>; Gabriel Siboni and Gal Perl-Finkel, "The IDF Exercises in Crete and Cyprus", in *INSS Insights*, No. 945 (28 June 2017), <https://www.inss.org.il/publication/idf-exercises-cyprus-crete>.

⁶⁶ Brenda Shaffer, "Israel–New Natural Gas Producer in the Mediterranean", in *Energy Policy*, Vol. 39, No. 9 (September 2011), p. 5379-5387.

⁶⁷ Menelaos Hadjicostis, "Cyprus, Israel, Greece Push for Gas Pipeline to Europe", in *AP News*, 8 May 2018, <https://apnews.com/c3efcfc905594688bc1f40aa98e47799>.

⁶⁸ EuroAsia Interconnector, *A Trans-European Energy Infrastructure Project. The EuroAsia Interconnector (Project and Progress)*, October 2017, http://www.euroasia-interconnector.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/EuroAsia_Interconnector_Project_and_Progress_English.pdf.

⁶⁹ Yaacov Benmeleh, "Greece's Energean Signs First Deal to Supply Gas to Israel", in *Bloomberg*, 28 May 2017.

⁷⁰ Kostis Geropoulos, "East Med Gas Forum Makes Cairo HQ", in *New Europe*, 17 January 2020, <https://www.neweurope.eu/?p=543060>.

⁷¹ Efraim Inbar, "The Deterioration in Israeli-Turkish Relations and Its International Ramifications", in *Mideast Security and Policy Studies*, No. 89 (February 2001), <https://besacenter.org/?p=2107>; Eran Lerman, "Israel's Emerging Relations in the Eastern Mediterranean", in *BESA Center Perspectives Papers*, No. 321 (8 December 2015), <https://besacenter.org/?p=9508>.

⁷² Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Israeli Forces Were Met with Pre-Planned Violence When Attempting to Board Flotilla*, 31 May 2010, http://mfa.gov.il/MFA/PressRoom/2010/Pages/Israel_Navy_warns_flotilla_31-May-2010.aspx.

⁷³ Bel Trew, "Israel Urges Turkey to Cut Ties with Hamas Over Allegations It Uses Country as Base to Launch Attacks", in *Independent*, 18 December 2019, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/>

Greece and Cyprus have long had tense relations with Turkey, mostly concerning Northern Cyprus. The gas issue has added another source of conflict, as Ankara is trying to discourage Cyprus from exploring gas in the waters off the island, as it fears that Northern Cyprus will not benefit from the discoveries. In February 2018, the Turkish navy blocked a drilling ship operated by Italian oil giant Eni, as it was trying to operate in waters south-east of Cyprus.⁷⁴ In November 2019, Turkey signed an agreement with the UN-recognised government in Libya that paves the way for the deployment of Turkish forces in Libya and sets a maritime boundary between the two nations. Coupled with Turkish assertiveness in Cypriot waters, it seems that Ankara is trying to counter the Israeli–Hellenic (and possibly broader) alliance. Until now, Israel has mostly benefited from its Mediterranean quasi-alliance: it offers a regional framework in which it is welcomed and that may be expanded, as well as strategic depth of sorts. Moreover, some in Jerusalem were hoping that the new allies will be able to foster better understanding of Israel's positions (mostly regarding the Palestinian and Iranian issues) within the institutions of the European Union.⁷⁵ However, the growing tensions with Turkey might put the alliance to a test. Greece and Cyprus might expect an Israeli show of force towards Turkey. Israel has never committed forces to any significant task in support of an ally before, and such a move is not expected to be popular nor wise politically.

Conclusion

Israel has not traditionally participated in regional power structure and alliances. Yet, the current competition in the Middle East between pro-Iran and anti-Iran camps is leading to some cooperation with the Arab Gulf states. The cooperation has limits though. It may not satisfy the Gulf states, which may reason that Israel cannot really help them balance against Iran. Israel is also probably aware of the limited ability of the Gulf states to fully balance against Iran, though it values their role. Moreover, with no progress on the Palestinian issue, Arab countries will be hesitant to make dramatic public moves towards Israel. Israel is not expected to play a significant role in opposing a more inclusive regional arrangement if it emerges in the Gulf, although it will monitor the effect on Iran's ability to operate near Israel.

Contrary to a decades-old approach, Israel has entered into an alliance of sorts with Greece and Cyprus. Focused on energy issues, the alliance includes also security cooperation. A more assertive Turkey in the East Mediterranean may put the alliance to a severe test. At least in part, this alliance reflects another Israeli adjustment to

[middle-east/israel-hamas-turkey-palestinian-militants-attack-erdogan-a9252016.html](https://www.middle-east/israel-hamas-turkey-palestinian-militants-attack-erdogan-a9252016.html).

⁷⁴ Stephen Jewkes, "Turkish Blockade of Ship Off Cyprus Is Out of Eni's Control: CEO", in *Reuters*, 16 February 2018, <https://reut.rs/2EHMwFH>.

⁷⁵ Yaacov Maor, "The Israeli-Hellenic Forum Is Launched" (in Hebrew), in *Jewish Traveler*, 13 November 2019, <https://www.jewishtraveler.co.il/forum-helvetic-1119>.

changing reality: the state's reliance on its gas depots in its exclusive economic zone in the Mediterranean. The alliance may also lead to the development of a broader axis around the newly formed East Mediterranean Gas Forum that includes also Egypt, Jordan and the Palestinian Authority. Italy, a founding member of the East Med Gas Forum, might also join the economic aspects of the axis, but is not expected to take part in the strategic-political side.

The close alliance with the United States is not affected, to date, by the US intention to decrease involvement in the region. Indeed, under President Trump Washington has offered unprecedented support for Israeli territorial designs in the West Bank and the Golan Heights and has become much more confrontational against Iran.

The entry of new global actors – Russia and China – into the Middle East forces Israel to invest in managing its relations with Russia, while trying to appease US pressures to limit Chinese economic activities in Israel. Israel is expected to face, to a growing degree, the need to balance its close alliance with the United States, and immediate economic and military pressures generated by China and Russia in the region. Thus far, Israel has been able to manage the tension effectively, in part due to the close relations between US President Trump and Prime Minister Netanyahu. The mercurial policies of President Trump, coupled with possible changes in power in Jerusalem and Washington, might make the balancing act far more challenging in the future.

The ongoing weakening of the states around it – Syria, Lebanon and Egypt – have created both challenges and opportunities for Israel. In this context, Israel sees stemming the influence of Iran as an immediate security challenge. Israel has grown more assertive in its efforts to confront Iran in the region, and is slowly heading towards a direct confrontation with it. Teheran's slow relaunch of its nuclear programme, probably including its military aspects, is further adding to the possibility that the two countries will clash militarily. However, the public health challenge posed by the coronavirus has mitigated this tension in the short term as both countries are focusing inwards.

Israel continues to contain the conflict with the Palestinians through effective security control over the West Bank (partly in partnership with the Palestinian Authority), and a partial siege and naval blockade of Gaza. There are however constant concerns that a humanitarian disaster in Gaza – such as an extreme outbreak of the Coronavirus disease – will require Israeli mitigating actions.⁷⁶ The geographical and political split in the Palestinian national movement makes Israel's task easier. As noted, the Palestine question is also related to broader regional security arrangements.

⁷⁶ Hagar Shezaf, "As Israel Prepares for Coronavirus in the Palestinian Territories, Gaza Raises Dilemmas", in *Haaretz*, 14 March 2020, <https://www.haaretz.com/middle-east-news/palestinians/premium-1.8673036>.

The overall outcome of these changes, and Israel's response to them, is a stronger Israel. It is not under immediate threat; its formerly hostile neighbours are either declining or committed to other conflicts. Moreover, Israel is more engaged in the region – both to the East and the West – in ways that enhance its power and influence. Israel enjoys close relations with world powers. Its most powerful ally, the US, is even supportive of Israeli territorial expansion generally rejected by the rest of the international community.

However, the current reality holds the seeds of significant instability in the medium and long term. In the medium term, there is a growing possibility of a direct Israeli–Iranian armed conflict. Israel's increasingly aggressive approach towards Iranian aspirations in Israel's near abroad, and a renewed Iranian nuclear programme, create the conditions for a larger conflict. Such a clash will most likely include Hezbollah and will occur on at least three fronts: Israel's border with Lebanon, the Syrian Golan front and Israel's home front.

The second source of future instability is Israeli designs to formally annex the West Bank or parts of it. Such a move will fundamentally alter Israel's demographic makeup with Palestinians and Jews almost equal in numbers. It is further bound to weaken Israel's democracy – already under strain. Israel is unlikely to offer equal legal status to its newly acquired population. Such a move is expected to create significant internal tensions between Jews who oppose the move and those who support it. It will also create the setting for future violent eruption, as the Palestinians are expected to resist such an arrangement.

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