Israel's Grand Strategy Ripples Begin at Home

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Israel's grand strategy seeks to safeguard its national survival and character and to live in peace with its neighbors. A small nation in a hostile region, it has had to perpetually frustrate enemies' attempts to destroy it, until they chose to make peace or at least accept its existence. This has been achieved by an outsize and advanced defense enterprise supported by a strong science and technology–based economy, which in turn is enabled by well-educated manpower. Israel's own capabilities are augmented by its relations with world powers, mostly the United States, economic diversification, regional partnerships, and soft power, enjoying support from Judeo-Christian communities. Israel was born into a conflict with Arabs, with the Palestinians in its midst. Gradually, this conflict transformed into a focused Israeli-Palestinian conflict, while Arab countries either made peace with Israel or remained at the conflict's sidelines. Israel is now the powerful side in the conflict, and its current policy seems to prefer managing the conflict and shaping conditions over time than seeking to decide it, a choice pregnant with profound risks to Israel's identity. For decades, Iran has generated and continues to generate the severest external security threats to Israel through its nuclear advances and proxy warfare. Israel thus faces two different yet serious security challenges, near and far, while its internal political struggles threaten to undermine the pillars of its national power.

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Writing a medium-size piece about Israel's grand strategy is a trying undertaking. One general struggle pitches brevity against depth, and a more mundane difficulty is Israel's strategic culture, not best known for its formality and documentation. Hence, the following essay offers an attempt to provide a historical context, identify organizing concepts, and describe some main thrusts of Israel's grand strategy. With an eye to Israel's emergence as a state, it outlines the changing security landscape from its beginning to the present, with a special focus on defense, and lays out the fundamentals of its strategy, with observations on how Israel navigates its strategic environment, from the outside in. Finally, it concludes with some of Israel's future challenges, stemming from domestic problems rather than from external threats. Rather than serving as a policy paper providing definite analysis and recommendation, this essay aims to provide depth, insight, and nuance to a uniquely successful chapter in the Jewish nation's history.

Israel and Grand Strategy?

Grand strategy, as defined by *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, is "a country's most complex form of planning toward the fulfillment of a long-term objective . . . [whose] formulation and implementation . . . require the identification of a national goal, a thorough assessment of the state's resources, and, ultimately, the marshaling of those resources in a highly organized manner to achieve the goal."[1]

Israel's strategic culture and political-bureaucratic habits do not readily lend themselves to the analysis of its grand strategy as a structured planning process, or even a crystallized text. Despite the issue of a multitude of academic and occasionally semiofficial proposals, an official document titled "Israel's Grand Strategy" or even a national security strategy has never been approved by its government.[2] Accordingly, rather than presuming to provide an official, let alone exhaustive, statement of this "most complex form of planning," this essay offers an impressionistic view of Israel's grand strategy, as reflected in its choices and behaviors over generations, proposing a contextualized broad-picture view with a special focus on defense and on the more recent decades.

Israel's National Goals and Formative Challenges

Israel's 1948 Proclamation of Independence provides a concise birth certificate for the newborn state of an ancient people and outlines the country's overarching goals: a sovereign state of the Jewish people in its historic motherland, with equal rights to all its citizens, recognized by the international community, peacefully accepted by its Arab neighbors, and supported by Jews worldwide.[3]

The paramount purpose of the State of Israel is thus to provide a national home for the Jewish people in its historical land of Israel, a Jewish and democratic state. Established in the midst of war, and with national annihilation traumas looming above its cradle, Israel's founding fathers were well aware of the daunting challenges ahead. Long before they proclaimed independence, they were cognizant of Israel's basic challenge: Jews were largely outnumbered in their historic homeland by local and neighboring Arabs and Muslims, who saw it as their own and fought to drive them away as foreign invaders. Israel had thus needed to overcome two dimensions of asymmetry: militarily, it had to survive against preponderant rivals, when its defeat would mean extinction; strategically, even in its military victories Israel could not impose its will upon its enemies compelling them to peacefully accept its existence. The underlying concept that emerged from this understanding was that the acceptance of Israel's existence will occur only after the Arabs lose all hope of destroying it by force, having repeatedly failed to crack the "iron wall" protecting it.[4] The "iron wall" thus outlines Israel's long road to peace with its neighbors, perpetually preventing them from destroying it as a first step to eventual acceptance.

Israel's Grand Strategy Principles

In realizing the "iron wall" concept and its strategic effect, several guiding principles can be identified in Israel's grand strategy, some of them predating its establishment as a state. Internally, Israel strives to establish a solid power base in its economy and in science and technology, both to support its security needs and to advance Israel's prosperity and national power. An outsize defense enterprise protects the civil core from external threats but also contributes to the defense and high-tech industries and the innovation ecosystem in an Israeli version of civil-military fusion. World Jewry has been tapped as a demographic reserve for Israel's population growth and as a source of financial aid and skilled professionals when the young country has most needed them. Externally, Israel counterbalances its sizable enemy potential by maintaining close relations with world powers and by partnering with regional powers against enemy coalitions. As its economy, science, and technology have developed, Israel has increasingly leveraged these relative advantages to promote its global position and foreign relations, diversifying its partners as the global markets allow. Generally speaking, Israel seems well aware of its size and limitations: as a small country lacking the heft to shape its environment in a grand way, it seeks to adapt to its changes and use their potential for prosperity and for strengthening its security posture. In other words, Israel, as many others, surfs regional and global waves rather than makes them.

The Changing Threat Landscape

In its formative War of Independence, Israel confronted the Palestinian paramilitary, and later on it countered the invading militaries of neighboring Arab nation-states. Geostrategically, the Jewish state was born into an Arab-Israeli conflict, with the Palestinians in its midst and neighboring countries at its frontiers. Egypt's 1979 peace with Israel, later followed by the 1994 peace with Jordan, signaled two gradual processes: the withdrawal of the conflict away from Israel's borders and the beginning of its contraction from an Israeli-Arab to an Israeli-Palestinian conflict. As first-ring threats declined, second- and third-ring threats to Israel have risen: from Iraq, whose missiles hit Israel in 1991; and, more importantly, from Iran, the foremost threat to Israel's national security for the current generation. The regional turmoil of the last decade has further weakened many Middle Eastern states and with them their governance and institutions, militaries included. The power vacuum has been readily filled with substate militias, many of them state sponsored.

Military invasions by land, peppered with state-sponsored guerrilla harassments, remained a main threat of reference during Israel's first three decades. The 1973 war was the high-water mark of Israel's industrial wars fought against widely deployed (or fielded) enemy armed forces, after which it still found itself waging a few small battles against the Syrian military but mostly fighting nonstate militias and guerrilla, terror, and hybrid insurgencies. Israel thus moved from the age of industrial wars to what General Sir Rupert Smith called "war amongst the people."[5] The military landscape thus saw the gradual decline of the large-scale

maneuvering threat to Israel and a parallel rise of small-scale attacks and increasing fire threats. Rockets and missiles have grown from a marginal and tactical nuisance to a major security concern, increasingly so as precision, diversification, and saturation enhance their potential impact. Over the decades, several enemies have been seeking to acquire weapons of mass destruction, a threat resonating in Israel due to its small size, vulnerability, and historical traumas.

Iran's threat to Israel combines three mutually reinforcing facets: its quest for a nuclear arsenal, its regional proxy-warfare industry, and its own national armed forces.[6] This systemic threat allows Iran to wage a regional gray-zone campaign, to conduct indirect attrition and diversion of its rivals, and to push active fighting away from Iranian territory and into proxy and enemy lands.[7] The conventional arm, national and by proxy, augments Iran's hand on the nuclear path and deters others from attacking Iran, while the nuclear path seeks eventual immunity for the actions of the regime and its malign campaigning. Iran's nuclear program embodies the main potential existential threat to Israel; the proxy network enables Iran to encircle Israel (and others in the region) with active military threats, an Iranian weapon wielded by local hands; and Iran's military forces and industries provide the power source and additional escalatory potential. Since 1979, most of Israel's conflicts were fought against Iran-supported militias and proxies, mostly Lebanese and Palestinian. The Iran-sponsored Lebanese Hezbollah gradually became the most prominent conventional military threat to Israel. Stepping into Syria's decade of civil war, Iran began to build a forward military frontier against Israel in Syria, combining national forces and various proxy militias. In what was later called "entrenchment," Iran deployed forces, bases, arms, and logistics, including weapons manufacturing, transport, and storage along the routes from Syria's border with Iraq to its borders with Lebanon and Israel.

The Pillars of Israel's National Defense

With its formative threat landscape in mind and internalizing its inferiority in size and resources as well as its lack of strategic depth, Israel's early national defense concept developed around three main pillars: deterrence, early warning, and decisive victory.[8] **Deterrence** was meant to dissuade its enemies from initiating war against it by repeatedly proving both the futility of making such an attempt and its prohibitive costs. As deterrence is by definition imperfect, **early warning** aimed to allow Israel to husband a small regular military and to promptly mobilize its much larger reserve forces when needed against the large and ever-ready standing armies of its enemies. Once mobilized, the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) sought quick and **decisive victory** over their enemies, serving several strategic purposes: to promptly remove the active threat to Israel for as long as possible, to recharge deterrence by demonstrating the futility and cost of enemy threats, and to allow Israel to release its reserves and return most of its troops back to their civilian jobs, resuming normal economic activity. These basic pillars have been repeatedly put to the test and adapted over time.

A widely shared assessment is that Israel also owns a strategic deterrent, while its leadership adheres to ambiguity, never officially acknowledging its nuclear capability nor joining the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. In 2011, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu reiterated the official Israeli stance that Israel will not "be the first to introduce nuclear weapons into the Middle East," a phrase first minted in 1963 by Shimon Peres addressing President John F. Kennedy.[9] The other side of the coin is Israel's "Begin Doctrine" of preventing its enemies' nuclear options, first when it destroyed Iraq's reactor in 1981, then when it did the same to Syria's in 2007.

Yet deterrence, conventional or not, rather than being a solid-state, foolproof "iron wall" against enemy aggression, is a dynamic interaction, constantly informed by the actors' current calculus, misconceptions, and creative exploration of cost-effective options, from full-scale war to military operations short of war, direct or by proxy. In 1973, President Anwar el-Sadat's strategic design defied Israel's deterrence, under a long-term calculus that sought a diplomatic victory despite a possible military defeat. Deterrence clearly failed when Hamas and Israel stumbled into the unintentional Gaza conflict in 2014 and similarly as Lebanese Hezbollah and Israel started a mutually undesired war in 2006. Currently, despite both Lebanese and Israeli disinterest in escalating to a full-scale war, brinkmanship and miscalculation still have serious potential for spurring a wide conflict on Israel's northern border.

Decisive victory has been easier to achieve and demonstrate against regular militaries in open battlefields than against guerrillas and militias waging long campaigns, "swimming like fish among the population" and embedding their military assets at its midst.[10] With 1967 being the last of Israel's wars involving border changes, holding enemy land at the end of fighting became less useful as a symbol of victory. As Israel was disinclined to capture, clear, and hold the battlespace for long periods, its enemies found it easier to declare victory out of the jaws of their military defeats, brandishing residual launching capability as proof of their win. Clearing up and finally defeating the wave of Palestinian terror in the early 2000s took several grinding years with Operation Defensive Shield. Hezbollah declared a "divine victory" in 2006, bragging that it held up against the strongest military in the region, yet only in 2013 it stated that restoration of the war damages was achieved. Hamas mostly claimed the same in the 2008, 2012, and 2014 conflicts. In fact, it was Israel's choice not to pursue decisive military victory, deeply aware of its inhibitive costs and fleeting benefits.[11] The mid-2010s IDF military strategy limited "decision" to the tactical-operational level, while defining "victory" at the political-strategic level as attaining the national war goals.[12]

While for the IDF, as the executive agent of military campaigns, decisive victory is still a major strategic-operational compass, it is increasingly evident that on the national level, Israel's recent and possibly future goals in any conflict usually seek the more modest aim of restoring calm under recharged deterrence, following heavy damage to the enemy. Such victories, thus, can only be judged in retrospect, and surely not as a measurable end-state at

the close of a given conflict. Synchronizing military "decision" and strategic victory requires bridging political-military approaches, concepts, and interdependencies. The dialogue between the cabinet members and generals must be robust and thorough before a first bullet is loaded.

When enemy militaries were still its main threat, Israel's land maneuver and superior air force were generally sufficient to move fighting to enemy ground and keep its own population centers out of harm's way. With the rise of fire threats, Israel found it necessary to add a fourth pillar to its previous three: **protection**, combining population protection with active rocket and missile defenses. Minimizing enemy impact on Israel's rear not only reduces the cost in direct blood, treasure, and economic disruption but also gives the government more breathing space to sidestep escalation as the only response to incoming fire.

The four pillars of Israel's defense have been manifested in respective national and military capabilities. Deterrence is the result of the overall impression in the enemies' minds of Israel's capabilities and willingness to use them, both to foil any hostilities and to exact prohibitive cost in return. In other words, it is Israel's shadow cast on others' perceptions and appraisals of its decision making and capabilities, taken together. Early warning is embodied in Israel's world-class intelligence enterprise, which over time has developed from its historic role as a war siren to engagement in myriad missions of counterterror, counterproliferation, and real-time targeting on a massive scale. Decisive victory is usually related to the IDF maneuvering capability and increasingly to its superior air force and its flexible, region-wide strike capability with massive precision. Cyberwarfare has stemmed from intelligence, greatly extending its reach, and gradually enhanced early warning, deterrence, protection, and decisive victory.

Israel's Campaign between Wars

The evolving threat landscape, as described, may well be read not only as a reflection of the changing regional and military tectonics, but also as Israel's enemies' recognition of its advantages and weaknesses. In other words, Israel's remaining enemies, recognizing the success of its defense concept, have chosen indirect proxy militia warfare over direct confrontations by state militaries, and ballistic rocket and missile attacks over conventional maneuver-centric warfare. More importantly, rather than attempting wide-scale intensive and decisive military conflicts with Israel, they prefer low-intensity friction over long periods of time under the threshold of full-scale war.

This landscape, emerging in the last four decades, reflects Iran's art of war and its strategic design, as is well demonstrated across the region. As a resource-rich and scientifically developed nation-state, Iran is the source of funding, arming, training, and guidance to local movements' militias. These armed movements, such as Lebanese Hezbollah, Yemen's Houthis, and Iraq's various Popular Mobilization Forces, are able to promote their own agenda at home while serving Iran's regional goals and grand strategy. Their collective modus operandi

seeks to harass, divert, and attrit Iran's enemies, such as Israel, Saudi Arabia, or the US forces in the region. This is Iran's well-orchestrated, undeclared war by proxy: slow burning, slow moving, fought by other peoples' hands from other peoples' lands. This paradigm of warfare intentionally defies the legalistic war-and-peace dichotomy and blurs the distinction between combatants and civilians. As such, it does not just attack Iran's rivals by force but assails the international law of armed conflict and weaponizes its protections.

Decades ago, Israel awoke to the central role of arms transfers from Iran to its proxies encircling Israel: Hezbollah in Lebanon and Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad in Gaza. It has reportedly begun to interdict those weapons shipments en route. When Syria's war had begun, Israel clarified that it would not accept attacks upon it, nor advanced weapons transfers to Hezbollah, nor acquisition of chemical weapons by terrorists. As Iran ramped up its efforts to establish its power base in Syria, Israel developed its occasional antiproliferation operations into an orchestrated campaign, coined the "Campaign between Wars" (CBW). While still revolving around the IDF's ultimate purpose, to protect Israel from war by deterring it, anticipating it, and preparing to decidedly win it, the CBW importantly identified the precious value of time "between wars" for Israel's security. Recognizing Iran's strategic use of "no-war" periods to shape the military and political landscape around Israel to its detriment, Israel, with the CBW, in fact accepted Iran's challenge by joining its long twilight struggle. Israel's campaign goals are to disrupt enemy buildup, deepen deterrence, improve intelligence, degrade enemy wartime capabilities, and defer war for as long as possible while optimizing the conditions to wage it should it erupt. A well-recognized CBW principle is refraining from declaring the strikes, leaving the victim a wider leeway to suspend retaliation, sometimes indefinitely. While large parts of the CBW remain clandestine, hundreds of intelligence-driven precision strikes by Israel over the years disrupted Iran's plans to arm Hezbollah with even more advanced weapons, postponed Iran's efforts to establish a forward logistic and operational military presence in Syria, and thwarted Iran's retaliatory attempts.

The Campaign between Wars is not a perfect nor a risk-free silver bullet but rather a long-term response to Iran's long gray-zone war against Israel. In addition to consuming resources in intelligence, operations, and leadership attention, it entails sensitive intelligence exposure, operational hazards, and retaliation and escalation risks, as well as promoting enemy understanding of Israel's capability and expediting rivals' learning and adaptation. Publicity, foreign or Israeli, has many times shortened the way to enemy retaliation. According to recent reporting, Israel has engaged in sabotaging Iranian tankers headed to Syria and thus deprived Hezbollah of hundreds of millions of dollars since at least 2019. After many months without a discernable response, several Iranian attacks on Israeli-owned vessels in early 2021 concurred with press reports of Israel's sabotage campaign.

While successfully retarding Iran's planned deployment to Syria by years, the CBW falls short of stopping it. After suffering fatalities in Syria, Hezbollah threatened to retaliate from

Lebanon and in 2019–20 repeatedly tried to fulfil its threats. While deterrence from war still has an effect, escalation is nevertheless probable due to the combination of miscalculated brinkmanship, tactical mishaps, and interconnected theaters of operations.

Israel's Campaign against Iran's Nuclear Program

Iran's decades-long quest for nuclear weapons is the severest threat to Israel's national security, as it has the potential to evolve into an existential threat. Unlike the nuclear programs in Iraq and Syria, Iran's program architecture has not offered a single juncture in time and capability allowing for it to be neutralized by a single "Begin Doctrine" strike. As Iran plays its nuclear program as a long game, Israel's campaign against it has also been waged as a long, multifaceted twilight struggle, combining intelligence, diplomacy, information operations, clandestine and covert operations, cyberwarfare, and military preparations.[13] As the final defeat of Iran's aspirations lies beyond Israel's capability, it seeks to maximize international leverage, led by the United States, to prevent, or at least to distance Iran from its nuclear goal as far as possible, for as long as possible. Over the years, the specific ways and means to that end are a subject of ongoing dialogue and occasional differences between Israel and its greatest ally. As a backstop, should all else fail, Israel will have to rely on its own military options and finally on its strategic deterrence.

Nonmilitary Sources of Power

Beyond its military punch, Israel has enjoyed a wide spectrum of national powers and tools of foreign exchange. Closest to the military field are its defense exports, uniquely battle tested in its ongoing military experiences. Partner countries also greatly benefit from Israel's quality intelligence services and their special focus on the Middle East. Israel's technological innovation, spanning from agriculture to medicine and from water and food to cybertech, answers many nations' demands and promotes Israel's global relations. Israel's defense, economic, and technological exports attract other nations to engage with it even prior to establishing formal diplomatic relations, and business exchanges have sometimes been made along intelligence channels.

In recent years, Israel's advances in water technology and the discovery of gas reserves in the eastern Mediterranean have not only helped it balance its water and energy needs but allowed it to use those essential resources as diplomatic tools: supplying water and gas to Jordan and the Palestinians, and also gas to Egypt's LNG facilities. Desalination and other water technologies are sought by developing countries but also by China. Advanced medical services attract regional and global patients and have been extended to Syrians, promoting cross-border relations.

Israel has also been able to leverage some of its less tangible soft-power aspects: its biblical appeal to Judeo-Christian audiences, and its diverse landscapes and historical sites to world tourists. The outsize number of Jewish Nobel laureates enhances Israel's reputation, boosting

its academic achievements as a scientific power. Another facet of Israel's soft power can be found, for better or worse, in many people's beliefs about its influence in America, which fluctuates along with Jerusalem's relations with the Washington administrations. Israel's relations with world Jewry are a point of special complexity: in terms of its purpose, Israel sees itself as the national home of all Jews choosing to live in it, and a sense of collective guarantee and mutual affinity is part of its foundational ethos. Jews worldwide vary in the ways they perceive Israel and its role in their beliefs, identity, and actual relations with it, from very strong to nonexistent. At times of hardship and opportunity, both in Israel and in the diaspora, many of them have chosen to immigrate ("ascend," or make Aliyah) to Israel, augmenting its numbers and contributing to its diversity, talent, and skills.

Israel and World Powers

Over the generations, great powers' support enabled Israel's early emergence and later enhanced its strategic weight, helping it to offset its enemies' material and political heft. Reaching beyond the Middle East, Israel has always sought the support of global powers: the pre-state British Mandate; early and fleeting support by the Soviet Union; Franco-British support during the 1956 Sinai campaign; West Germany's reparations from the early 1950s to the mid-1960s; France's strategic support, which until 1967 aided Israel with major arms and nuclear technology; and, from the 1960s onwards, the irreplaceable backing of the United States. America's strategic support became one of Israel's national security pillars not only as a result of its generous military and defense aid but, most importantly, by its provision of political, veto-wielding support against Israel's numerous detractors in world institutions, above all the United Nations Security Council.

The United States is seen in Israel, and probably by many others, as a strategic ally in all but formal definition. Both partners often stress their democracies and shared values, differences in size, language, and government systems notwithstanding. While the largest Jewish community outside of Israel lives in America, Israel's largest support group there is probably Evangelical Christians. Israel has historically sought bipartisan support in the US, which is becoming more difficult as both countries' politics are increasingly polarized. And despite the close relations, Israel sometimes has found itself at odds with the US on two of its most important national security issues: the Palestinian conflict and Iran. The differences of opinion naturally reflect location, size, and strategic scope but also a differing sense of threat, urgency, priority, and appetite for risk.

In the great power context, several major developments have shaped Israel's landscape in the last two decades, laying the groundwork for its policy in this regard. Since the September 11 attacks, the United States has focused its major efforts in the Middle East as part of a global War on Terror: in Afghanistan, in Iraq, and later in the anti-ISIS campaign. While America's focus areas differed from those of Israel, the latter proved valuable to its strategic ally by providing high-quality intelligence while operationally contributing to anti–Islamic State efforts in areas where the US was less active.

In the aftermath of the 2008 and 2014 Gaza conflicts, the 2010s saw some European economic entities promoting boycotts against Israel, as part of the Palestinian BDS (Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions) campaign; in those years, Israel sought to diversify its trade partners and turn east against possible additional difficulties with Europe, traditionally a major trade partner. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu saw great opportunities for Israel in China's rising economy and in advancing trade relations with it. Under his leadership the trade volume between them soared, focusing on goods, infrastructure projects, and technology. Finding common ground between Israel's "start-up nation" capabilities and China's technology needs and resources, in March 2017 the two countries crowned their relations as a "Comprehensive Innovative Partnership," a unique title on China's diplomatic menu, especially picked to avoid using the term "strategic," serving both sides' preferences.

Later in 2017, the Trump administration's National Security Strategy recognized China as America's topmost challenge and the great-power competition as America's strategic conceptual framework.[14] As the United States woke to recognize the gaps between its decades-long wishful assumptions and policies about China and the reality of competition, it began efforts to rally its allies and partners behind its new understanding, expecting them to follow its main lines of response to the challenge. In Israel's case, America's demands focused on blocking or decreasing China's role in Israel's communications, infrastructure, and investment, or more specifically, 5G, the Haifa Bay container port, and investment oversight. These demands, similar to those raised with other US allies and partners, are more a generic reflection of America's concern than a customized response to China's actual challenge to Israel. As a matter of fact, Israel has been much more stringent on communication security than other countries and needed no reminder about foreign access to its mobile networks. As will be proven by expected US Navy port calls to Haifa in the next few years, the Chinese operation by Shanghai International Port Group of the Haifa Bay port, too often portrayed as a severe threat to Fifth Fleet security and a potential bridgehead for China into Israel's networks, is a low-level risk manageable by the Israeli security measures included in the contract and appropriate measures taken by the US Navy. Investment has also been raised as a possible inroad for China to data, strategic infrastructure, technology, and influence, which are valid points, and which the Committee on Foreign Investment in the United States was built to secure. Israel's response to the US demands and concerns was given mainly behind closed doors, reportedly not always to the full satisfaction of Washington. Investment oversight was slightly augmented in early 2020 by a Treasury-led advisory committee whose opinion Israel's regulators may voluntarily seek. Notably, several deals with Chinese entities have been blocked prior to this change, as have others afterward. Also noteworthy is the fact that civilian technology, a main frontier for great-power competition, is not a regulated field in Israel and thus falls out of the enhanced oversight mechanism's scope. Yet a clear-eyed comparative analysis of China's modus operandi and Israel's power structure may lead to different risk analysis than the one pursued by Washington, focusing more on human venues for influence than on technical capabilities.

In September 2015 Israel woke up with a new military neighbor in Syria, as Russia decided to directly intervene in the war in President Bashar al-Assad's favor. With Russia deploying military forces, including aircraft and air defense systems, and Israel's Campaign between Wars ongoing in Syria, the Israeli Air Force (IAF) was obliged to share active operational airspace with a non-allied power. Unlike Turkey, which in November 2015 shot down a Russian jet and suffered the consequences, Israel prudently established an operational communication line with the Russian air command in Syria to allow deconfliction and avoid mistakes and unwarranted implications. Israel-Russia communication is conducted in three other venues above the tactical deconfliction: military dialogue between the respective high commands and general staffs, discussion in the national security councils, and senior leadership–level communications between President Vladimir Putin and PM Netanyahu. Some voices in the United States express their displeasure of Israel's "warming up" with Russia, implicitly at America's expense. In fact, these relations are a far cry from Israel's close ties with the US and, at that, wrought with tensions. Russia's defense and foreign policy establishment clearly resents Israel's strikes in Syria, and harshly blamed it when Syrian air defenses downed a Russian airplane during an IAF raid in late 2018. Despite some guarantees given to Israel, Russia has not stopped Iran and its proxies from entrenching in the Golan Heights, but at the same time it turns a blind eye to Israel's repeated strikes on its enemies there, as long as Russian forces are not endangered and the Assad regime's survival is not threatened. While Russia has operational fighter jets and advanced S-400 air defense systems in theater, and has supplied S-300 batteries to Syria, it has never employed the former against IAF jets nor handed control over the latter to the Syrians. Finally, through Israel's recurring elections, it is difficult to miss the repeated gestures by President Putin in support of Netanyahu's campaigns, mostly through humanitarian tokens: returning IDF MIAs' remains retrieved from Damascus, or releasing some Israeli citizens either captured in Syria or severely sentenced in Russia as a presidential personal favor to the premier.

Israel's policy towards the great powers is not unlike many other countries': relying on the United States as the irreplaceable strategic ally for political and security support and economic relations; trading with Europe and Asia as important economic partners; hedging against Russia's spoiling power by prudently managing the serious differences; and seeking to benefit from China's economic opportunities to advance Israel's prosperity, without fully understanding China's unique ways and means. In the choppy waters of sharpening great-power competition, this balancing act becomes an even finer art.

Israel's Regional Partnerships

To counterbalance the historic Arab coalition against it, Israel has sought other regional partners. For decades these have been non-Arab Turkey and Iran, who were Jerusalem's partners on the outer rings while the inner ring of neighboring countries was the enemies' somewhat united front. A first watershed break in this dimension came in 1979: just as Egypt pivoted from being Israel's strongest enemy to a peace treaty partner, the fall of the shah and the Islamic revolution turned Iran from Israel's strategic ally to its worst nemesis.

With the collapse of the Soviet Union, the former Soviet republic of Azerbaijan emerged as an important partner for Israel on energy, defense, and security, not least thanks to its proximity to Iran.

In the early 2000s, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's rule brought an end to Turkey's strategic partnership with Israel and led the relations between the countries to acrimonious lows, hitting their nadir in the 2010 Mavi Marmara incident. Turkey's meddling in Temple Mount affairs and its ongoing support to Hamas are indeed thorns in Israel's side, yet it prudently avoided pushing its relations with Turkey off a final cliff, and instead the two maintained significant trade even in politically contentious periods. Turkey's aggressive policy increasingly became a source of concern to many countries in the Middle East and the Eastern Mediterranean. Among the former, Turkey's central role in the Muslim Brotherhood camp and its support to Qatar and Hamas are a source of concern to the Sunni pragmatists in the Gulf, Egypt, and the Palestinian Authority. Ankara's exploits in Libya and the Mediterranean added Greece, Cyprus, and France to the already concerned Egypt and UAE. The EastMed gas deposits, some of them in Israel's Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ), added an economic dimension to the group of European and Middle Eastern countries coming together to offset Turkey's push.

Israel's regional outreach has not ended with non-Arab powers and has increasingly extended to Arab states. While diplomatic ties had to wait for the political landscape to thaw, intelligence channels have been the tool of choice for secret diplomacy across the Arab and Muslim world. After the peace treaty with Egypt, Sadat's pioneering breakthrough, most of Israel's regional relations remained below the radar until the 1990s peace process and the Oslo Accords. Israel's 1994 peace treaty with the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan was a late manifestation of the two parties' deep-rooted relations from the beginning of the century. A similar "double-decker" pattern of relations with Israel can be recognized in other regional states: while quietly benefiting from Israel's various advantages in intelligence, defense, business, and other low-profile channels, these states' leaders carefully avoided high exposure to their own publics. Historically, this was mainly due to the central place of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in regional politics, and perhaps sometimes also nurtured by local leaderships themselves as a source of domestic legitimacy. Most Middle East experts were well aware of the different messaging heard in close rooms in contrast to public statements of their regional interlocutors.

Over the last decade, the poetically and wishfully misnamed "Arab Spring" has brought about a profound change to the Middle East landscape. The regional tremors tore down false political facades and exposed reality for what it is. Regimes across the region recognized their top challenges from within—domestic politics, the economy, governance and legitimacy—and from without—an aggressive Iran and Sunni radicalism. It became increasingly clear that Israel is not a threat to most of the region, and that the Palestinian issue is not a top regional priority, let alone the center of Middle Eastern trouble and the key to its stability. These truths, long recognized by many rulers in the region, were

the fundamental conditions to what later culminated in the Abraham Accords. These US-sponsored agreements between the UAE, Bahrain, Sudan, Morocco, and Israel, as with their predecessors with Egypt and Jordan, are a formal declaration of the signatories' current national interests, rather than their historical talking points. Saudi Arabia, like others, has yet to reach the point of official relations yet has already signaled such relations are under way, in media statements, in Israeli overflight approvals, and in semi-discreet leadership meetings. As Israel shares much of its advantages with its regional partners even before formal relations, it has limited leverage left to advance them. Still, as is repeatedly stated, Israel itself holds an important key to unlocking its regional partnerships going public: its policy with regards to the Palestinian conflict.

As the Middle Eastern states are not the only entities affecting its politics, Israel has extended its relations to some of their minorities, such as Israeli and Levant Druze, Iraq's Kurds, and Lebanon's Maronite Christians. The relations with the Maronites, however, were the manipulative lure that in 1982 drew Israel into its long Lebanon quagmire, leaving it much more cautious in future circumstances. And indeed, as the war in Syria broke out a decade ago, the specter of Lebanon loomed darkly above Israel's calculus, leaving it with no appetite for intervention beyond the narrow approach to immediate security and addressing Iran's military encroachment. Under that general policy choice, a bottom-up initiative led to a modest relationship ("Good Neighbors") with local cross-border Syrian Golan communities.[15] The sole focus of that exchange was local and tactical: Israel provided for the regime-starved communities' needs in return for their preventing attacks on Israel, but also to dissuade Sunni factions from attacking Syrian Druze communities, whose relatives live on the Israeli side. Until the program was terminated in summer 2018 with the return of the regime forces to the Golan, Israeli hospitals treated thousands of sick and wounded Syrian children, women, and elderly.

And so, even short of formal diplomatic relations, Israel's quiet exchanges in intelligence, business, and security channels gave way to mutually beneficial relations, expanding Israel's strategic depth beyond its tight borders, extending forward its early warning, its border security, and sometimes its basing options.

Israel and the Palestinians

The Palestinian conflict is the epicenter of Israel's strategic environment, being the one closest to its territorial heart but also the nearest to its core identity. After bringing about a settlement on its longest borders with Jordan and Egypt, the Palestinian conflict holds the highest stakes in terms of Israel's geography. Beyond a territorial zero-sum conflict between two peoples claiming the same land as their homeland, it is deeply rooted in religious beliefs and entangled in historical and emotional grievances and narratives. Palestinians seek their justice, rights, dignity, self-determination, sovereignty, and independence but vary on the end-state and on the ways leading there: A Palestinian state alongside Israel or in its stead? Equal rights to all citizens within one state, hence possibly with an Arab

majority? By armed struggle and resistance, political settlement, and/or political, legal, and economic warfare?

Naturally, all Palestinian designs to replace Israel or to undermine its Jewish character threaten its survival and purpose, while armed struggle and resistance endanger its safety and security. Yet even political compromises, assuming they are feasible and are not just veiled and phased replacement plans, pose an existential dilemma for Israel: between maintaining the Jewish majority and democratic character of Israel, allowing Palestinian self-rule or independence; or continuing to control the Palestinians, either for security reasons or to maintain control over the whole of the historical motherland, in accordance with some religious and national convictions.

Since the 1980s Israel has engaged in multiple efforts to address the Palestinian conflict and challenges: invading Lebanon and displacing the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) militias and leadership to Tunis; suppressing the first insurgency (Intifada), joining the Madrid talks, signing the Oslo Accords, and allowing PLO forces into Gaza and the West Bank; sustaining a murderous suicide-attack campaign, suppressing the second armed insurgency, and recapturing Palestinian cities. In 2005 Israel disengaged from the Gaza Strip, evacuated all of its settlers and forces, and redeployed around its perimeter in a decisive attempt to shape a new reality: shortening the friction lines while carving the Strip and its residents out of Israel's control and demographic equation. Gradually, the Palestinian system morphed into two distinct areas: the West Bank, governed by the Palestinian Authority (PA) under Israel's overriding military rule; and the Gaza Strip, governed by Hamas since 2007, when it had forcefully usurped Fatah rule there. Since the disengagement, Israel adopted a "differentiation" (in Hebrew: Biddul) policy between Gaza and the West Bank, seeking to demonstrate the advantages of the PA strategic choice of political accommodation over Hamas's way of armed "resistance" terror. Later on, Israel's policy gradually developed into a dual-containment strategy, maintaining the Palestinian divide, opposing reconciliation, weakening both Palestinian governing entities by economic pressure and political isolation while minimizing the costs and harm of security threats to Israel.

Politically, Israel's policy is imprinted with Palestinian politics and their own complexities. While the West Bank's PA is at once a political rival, a potential negotiating partner, and a security partner for Israel, Hamas is a sworn enemy committed to Israel's destruction, and at the same time it is the effective power holder in the Strip, with which practical understandings can be reached. **Operationally**, successful security measures and coordinated counterterror campaigning gradually brought active West Bank security threats against Israel to negligible levels, greatly widening the political latitude enjoyed by its leadership. Gaza, on the other hand generated an ongoing series of increasing security threats, mainly rocket and tunnel attacks, culminating in three military campaigns in 2008, 2012, and 2014. **Economically**, Israel's strategy sought to strike the fine balance between allowing economic stability, which in turn contributes to security stability, and

depriving the adversaries of resources for their military buildup while weakening them politically. Clearly, excessive economic pressures on the Strip by Israel, the PA, and Egypt were the driving force behind the summer 2014 escalation and again in the spring 2018 popular Gaza border assaults. Yet, over time, Israel managed to contain Gaza's security threats by combining defense and political-economic arrangements: on the defense side, perimeter defenses with underground and overground obstacles, early-warning and missile defense systems, and deterring and disruptive strikes. On the political-economic side, it reached an undisclosed yet effective arrangement, mediated by Egypt, supported by Qatar and the UN, and answering some of Hamas's economic demands. Hamas, seeking to secure its economic and political gains, gradually became an effective restraint on attacks by the more radical factions and semipopular riots against Israel. In an indirect, mutually driven, and smartly mediated manner, Israel and Hamas have reached a thinly veiled practical arrangement and understanding, decreasing violence despite their unbridgeable political and ideological differences.

Stepping back and taking a grand strategic view at the sum of Israel's accumulative policy choices in the Palestinian conflict, it is quite evident that after the Oslo Accords' failure and the following bloodshed, Israel lost hope in a negotiated peace with the Palestinians in the foreseeable future. Instead, Israel's policy choice is based not on conflict resolution, which seems unattainable, but on conflict management, seeking to defer decisions, minimize costs, and maximize advantages. In league with the Palestinians' own split political leadership, over time Israel has managed to shape a reality with two weak Palestinian entities in a differential two-piece system. In Gaza, Israel relinquished its claims and now seeks to complete its political disengagement while containing the Strip's security threats. This it does by implicitly accepting Hamas's rule in all but formal recognition, also allowing economic stabilization by connecting the Strip to Israel's energy and transportation infrastructure. This choice reveals the tension between Israel's short- and medium-term goals to calm and stabilize its southern border and its long-term goal to prevent the rise to power of radical Islamists and Muslim Brotherhood affiliates such as Hamas in the Palestinian system.

In the West Bank, however, Israel seems to seek another goal. While preserving the PA as a weak self-rule system relieving Israel of the costs of direct rule over the Palestinians, it gradually expands its grip and footprint in historical Judea and Samaria. The claims that this expansion has reached a point of no return, preventing a viable and contiguous future Palestinian state, are too mechanical in nature, yet Israel's efforts certainly shape both future realities and possible future space for negotiations. Indeed, somewhat similar to China's island-building strategy in the South China Sea, Israel's Judea and Samaria strategy seeks to gradually shape the realities on the ground (as China does at sea) or to set the stage for negotiations from a greatly advantageous position. Most importantly, as rollback seems politically untenable, it shows the Palestinians that contrary to their past belief, time is not on their side, and there is a price for their intransigence.

Rather than defining a clear vision and setting final goals for its borders and its relationship with the Palestinians, Israel has decided not to decide on its final destiny. Its great success in quelling Palestinian terror and violence has created its security paradox. When the cost imposed by the Palestinian situation is low, there is no urgent impetus for Israeli leadership to seek a more permanent solution. Seemingly, this leads to the continuation of the status quo, but in fact, despite that expression's meaning, reality is not *where things stand* but rather *where they flow*. The actual "fluxus quo" includes multiple streams of demography, economics, and the gradual creep of the Israeli footprint. In its current riverbed, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is mostly in the hands of its two antagonists, for better and for worse. Other channels have dried up, as can be seen in the diminishing regional and international interest and energy. Yet this river's current route, rather than flowing toward open and better horizons, flows eastward, to the Dead Sea: an inseparable and bleeding reality that will jeopardize Israel's character and purpose as a Jewish and democratic state.

Recent Years and Those Ahead

From the daunting conditions of its establishment to today, from its humble beginnings to its current power, Israel is a fantastic success story. Its grand strategy principles allowed it not only to survive but to flourish as an economic, scientific, and military power and to be recognized as a desired partner around the world and in its region.

Two main external forces still threaten Israel's future: from far beyond its borders, the Islamic Republic of Iran, threatening Israel's security with its dual strategy of nuclear weapons ambitions on the one hand and the proxy warfare enterprise on the other; and at close quarters, the unresolved conflict with the Palestinians, which threatens not only Israel's security but its identity. On both fronts, no quick solution is within reach, and a long-game strategy is called for, harnessing all the sources of national power. Against the Iranian threats, Israel has limited abilities, and the problem requires global and regional responses. Israel can bide time, expose Iran's secrets, disrupt and delay its progress, roll some efforts back, and rally world powers, but it cannot prevent Iran's schemes single-handedly. For final resolution, Iran itself needs to decide that its schemes against Israel are not worth it, or in other words, recognize the "iron wall."

On the Palestinian front, however, Israel is in a much more advantageous position, as it can play a dominant role in shaping the common environment. As explained earlier, Israel's policy is currently drifting toward a future that threatens its Jewish and democratic character. To change course, it needs to adopt a proactive approach toward a different horizon, through a strategic policy turn.[16]

Yet it is on Israel's domestic front that the most profound challenges to its national security reside. Since 2018 its government has been stuck in limbo due to criminal, legal, and political entanglements. Its institutions of government are weakening, national decision making has become more centralized and authoritarian, liberties have been infringed upon

under anti-COVID-19 pretexts, truth assaulted, and moral norms eroded. These are not unknown in other countries in the age of new media, fake news, and post-truth, yet for Israel, beset by serious external threats, it is more dangerous. And at a deeper level, beneath the day-to-day trouble, lie more serious concerns: larger parts of the society fall behind with regard to modern education and participation in Israel's economy. Will its politically divided, fractured society be able to sustain the strong economy and the advanced science base that powers Israel's national security enterprise? With "Hope" being its national anthem, realistic optimism may be the answer.

NOTES

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