

The Arab-Israeli Conflict Revisited

Israeli Regional Strategies: Balancing the Arab Core, the New Periphery, and Great Powers

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Strategic-Historical Backdrop

Viewed in retrospect, 70 years after the creation of the state, the evolution of Israel's regional and international strategic relations can be divided into several fairly unique time periods. The first three decades, until 1977, witnessed repeated wars with the surrounding Arab states, together with a high degree of international isolation. One exception was Israel's "periphery" alliances with Iran, Turkey, Ethiopia, the Iraqi Kurds and other primarily non-Arab states and ethnic groups on the geographic or demographic margins of the Middle East, including in newly independent Africa.² Another was a close strategic relationship with a global power: briefly, in 1948, the Soviet Bloc, then the UK, France and, since 1967, the United States.

The original periphery doctrine faded away decades ago due to a series of failures and one signal success. The Shah of Iran abandoned the Iraqi Kurds in 1975, thereby cutting their link to Israel. The Shah himself fell in 1979. There then followed the disastrous failure of the relationship with the Lebanese Maronites in 1982-83. In contrast, the peace process with Egypt that commenced in 1977 – meaning the beginning of peace with the Sunni Arab core surrounding Israel – paradoxically constituted a periphery doctrine success. Egypt's arrival at the negotiating table appeared to fully justify the effort invested for so many years in demonstrating to the

Arabs that Israel could survive their prolonged siege and deter them by linking up with countries on the Middle East periphery.

Peace with the Arabs and acceptance by the region was always the primary strategic objective. Egyptian-Israeli peace was followed in due course by the Oslo breakthrough with the Palestinians and peace with Jordan. By then Israel had witnessed the collapse of the Soviet Union and the Soviet Bloc. This in turn opened the door to relations with a host of major powers led by Beijing, Delhi and Moscow, a radical expansion of Israel's international diplomatic and commercial reach, the energetic integration of Israel's robust post-industrial economy into global trade, and massive immigration to Israel from the former Soviet countries – a dynamic deemed by the Arab world to have granted Israel unbeatable demographic critical mass. While Israel-Arab peace was slow to expand, classic Israel-Arab wars appear to have ended in 1973, to be replaced by asymmetric conflicts and by the Iranian nuclear threat.

Fast forward to the new millennium. Peace with Egypt and Jordan, coupled with the increasingly dysfunctional nature of many Arab regimes over the first decade of the 21st century, signalled to Israel that it had little to fear in the foreseeable future from a coalition of Arab states. Accordingly, the Palestinian issue, still festering and very much in the consciousness of the international community, has increasingly taken on characteristics of a painful domestic dynamic within the confines of Israel-Palestine. Thus we are witness to the fading concept of a separate Palestinian state on the West Bank due to a combination of repeated Palestinian rejection of Israel's negotiating offers, Palestinian political and geographic divisions, and

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² For an in-depth analysis of the periphery doctrine, see: ALPHER, Yossi. *Periphery: Israel's Search for Middle East Allies*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015.

the ramifications of a growing Israeli Jewish settler population. Correspondingly, we confront the drive, willy-nilly, by an emerging and dynamic political majority of right-wing messianic pro-settler elements, to swallow the West Bank and East Jerusalem into some sort of one-state entity – no matter how grievous the strategic consequences for Israel.³

Netanyahu Leverages the Arab Revolutions to Develop New Strategic Relationships

The 2011 “Arab Spring” revolutions accelerated the emergence of both political and militant Islam – not only on Israel’s borders but in the former periphery as well. Revolutions in Syria and Egypt generated potential threats to Israel by Sunni Islamists from ISIS, al-Qaeda and other movements in the Syrian Golan region and Egyptian Sinai – threat perceptions that, it quickly emerged, were shared by Egypt and by Jordan, which, like Israel, borders southern Syria.

Even Arab revolutions further afield were understood to endanger Israel and its immediate neighbours. Thus, the revolution in Libya caused the dispersal of a huge arsenal of arms not only throughout the African Sahel but to Islamists in Sinai and the Gaza Strip. The civil war in Yemen not only confronted Saudi Arabia with the perception of Iranian infiltration on its south-eastern flank but projected a danger to shipping through the Bab al-Mandeb Strait, thereby affecting Israeli and Egyptian interests. In parallel, the emergence of an increasingly Islamist government in Turkey and, particularly, the growing threats posed by Iran – a nuclear threat until the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA)/Iran nuclear deal but, even prior to 2015, a threat of radical Shiite power projection as far afield as Yemen, Syria, Lebanon and Iraq – persuaded Israel that it could again be surrounded by a ring of hostile states and entities: close to home, Islamists in the Levant, the Gaza Strip and Egyptian Sinai; further afield, Turkey and Iran.

These developments set the scene for our discussion of new and dynamic dimensions in Israeli strategic security policies in 2016: enhanced yet largely clandestine strategic relations with Israel’s Sunni Arab “core” neighbours, a new “periphery” to balance and deter Sunni and Shiite Islamist threats,

new military and economic strategic depth in the eastern Mediterranean, and expanded strategic relations with major powers such as China, India and Russia that share Israel’s concerns regarding militant Islam. All this, while the bedrock relationship with the US weathers tensions with the Obama Administration and Israel’s key economic and strategic ties to Europe are tested by the Palestinian issue.

The Mediterranean: Anti-Islamist and Economic Strategic Depth

On 8 December 2016, in Jerusalem, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, Greek Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras and Cypriot President Nicos Anastasiades held their second summit meeting in less than a year. Their discussion agenda had not changed from previous meetings: it ranged from shared security concerns regarding problematic neighbours – Islamizing Turkey, Iran’s Hezbollah proxy force in Lebanon, and, of course, the sparks flying from the war in Syria – to the prospect of exporting natural gas via Cyprus to Greece from Israel’s Leviathan discovery in the Mediterranean. The three also discussed joint military exercises, surely a sign of an intimate strategic relationship.

The anomaly of this meeting lies in its unprecedented nature. Both Greece and Cyprus were traditionally considered pro-Arab states harbouring a cool attitude toward Israel. They needed Arab oil, and by favouring the Arab cause they sought to isolate their enemy, Turkey, from its presumed natural hinterland of Arab Islamic countries. Only in recent years did they readjust their perspective to factor in the chaos generated by Arab revolutions, as well as the availability of ample alternative energy sources.

Because in December 2016 Greece was deeply and grudgingly indebted financially to its European Union partners and Cyprus was scarcely better off, Israel was not about to reap financial benefits from its two Hellenic partners. Nor would Jerusalem enjoy much by way of energy benefits. The logistics of laying a seabed gas pipeline to Greece from Israel’s Leviathan gas deposit, which lies 100 km west of Israel’s Mediterranean coast, are daunting. Moreover Turkey, having patched up relations with Israel in late 2016, wants the

³ For more background and detail see: ALPHER, Yossi. *No End of Conflict: Rethinking Israel-Palestine*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016.

gas, and the logistics of transporting it to the Turkish Mediterranean coast are a great deal easier.

For Israel, the benefits of a Hellenic alliance lay elsewhere. After 2011, Greece and Cyprus needed Israel primarily as a buffer against Turkey and the militant Islam generated by the Arab revolutions. Greece in particular was nervous because it had become home to upwards of a million Muslim migrants and refugees from as far afield as Afghanistan. Prime Minister Netanyahu, the primary Israeli architect of the relationship, needed the two European Hellenic states as a trump card in his dealings with Islamist Turkey but also, he hoped, as friendly votes in a European Union that was increasingly critical of Israel's behaviour toward the Palestinians. Netanyahu's tactics appear to have been helpful regarding relations with Turkey. By late 2016 Ankara was completing a lengthy reconciliation process with Israel that ended the bilateral crisis engendered by the Mavi Marmara incident of 2010, which involved a Turkish attempt to break the Israeli blockade of Gaza. Six years later, Turkey's President Erdogan needed Israel more than he needed to support the Palestinians in Gaza.

Interestingly, throughout the years of crisis Turkish-Israeli economic relations never suffered; indeed the two countries, while still beset by a bilateral diplomatic crisis, jointly leveraged Arab chaos for their mutual benefit. Since it was impossible for Turkish goods to be transported safely from Turkey through Syria and Iraq to Saudi Arabia and the Persian Gulf, Turkish container trucks transited Israel between Haifa, where they arrived by sea, and the Israel-Jordan border, from where they proceeded to Gulf consumers. In 2015, some 13,000 Turkish trucks made this journey. Turkey, in return, allowed Iraqi Kurdish oil to transit its territory for passage by sea to Israel.

Over the course of 2016, Israel also entered into talks with an increasingly friendly Egypt about marketing its gas. Egypt, fighting ISIS in both the Sinai Peninsula and the Egyptian heartland, needed security cooperation with Israel against militant Islam even more than Cyprus and Greece did.

Then, too, Russia, now firmly implanted on Syria's Mediterranean coast, was also interested in Israeli gas. If and when war-torn Syria began to heal, it too would explore the Mediterranean for gas, and Russia, now once again its patron power, could play a

useful role in ensuring maritime harmony between Israeli and Syrian (and Lebanese) gas fields.

By early 2017, the overall effect of this grand confluence of security and energy was the impression that Israel was doing well on its western front – from Turkey via Greece and Cyprus to Egypt and Russia. This was a direct consequence primarily of the need for cooperation against the spillover effect of Arab revolution from the direction of Syria and Lebanon, with gas as a bonus. The eastern Mediterranean was emerging, from Israel's standpoint, as a region supplying both economic and security strategic depth.

West Africa and Central Asia

Nor was Netanyahu's success in leveraging Arab chaos confined to the area west of Israel. In July 2016, he travelled south to East Africa to meet no fewer than six heads of state – from Ethiopia, Kenya, Uganda, South Sudan, Rwanda and Tanzania – and sign security agreements providing for Israeli support in countering Islamist terrorism, presumably from the direction of Sudan, Somalia and Yemen, all countries in crisis. It was the first African visit by an Israeli prime minister in 30 years.

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In December, after meeting with Tsipras and Anastasiades, Netanyahu ventured north to Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan. In Baku, President Ilham Aliyev noted publicly that his country had in recent years purchased nearly five billion dollars worth of Israeli weapons and would soon take possession of the Israeli Iron Dome anti-rocket missile system. Most of these purchases were almost certainly paid for in shipments of Caspian Sea oil. Unlike the Mediterranean instance, this meet-

ing of energy and security considerations linking Israel to a country on the periphery of the Arab and Muslim world did not evolve due to the outbreak of Arab revolutions. Rather, it relates to the two countries' shared concerns about the threat projected from south of Azerbaijan by Iran's militant Shiite Islam.

The Arab Core

Moving from the Middle East periphery to the Arab heartland, Netanyahu, in 2016, was increasingly comfortable boasting of Israel's enhanced strategic ties not only with Egypt but with Jordan, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates as well. The level of security cooperation achieved since 2011 due to the threat posed by militant Arab Islamists and by Iran and its proxies in the Levant has been unprecedented. For their part, the Saudis and Emiratis have no formal ties with Jerusalem. But by 2017 the strategic relationship had developed sufficient depth for all sides to acknowledge it quite openly – while implementing it very much in the shadows – and to point to the rationale: a shared perception of a militant Islamist threat, Sunni and Shiite, that warranted close intelligence and operational cooperation and overshadowed any lingering considerations of “traditional” enmity.

The Eurasian Powers

To round out the picture, after 2011 Netanyahu was also able to leverage the Islamist threat as a means of developing strategic relationships with three major world powers. Russia, China and India each have issues with militant Islam: Russia in the Caucasus and Volga-Kazan, China in the western province of Xinjiang, and India vis-à-vis Pakistan. All have experienced a rise in Islamist terrorism in recent years. All sought Israeli expertise and intelligence, which involved enhanced economic and strategic ties.

One crucial area of cooperation with Russia involved Syria. When the Russians arrived there in September 2015, Netanyahu quickly made the Israeli case to President Putin that the two not get in one another's way in the skies over Syria. This was not simple: Israel needed freedom of action in the air of southern Syria to continue interdicting Syrian arms shipments to Hezbollah in Lebanon, while Russia had arrived to

rescue the very same Syrian regime that, in coordination with Iran, was arming Hezbollah.

Netanyahu was the first foreign leader to meet with Putin to discuss military coordination in Syria. From Israel's standpoint, in contrast to the Cold War era, Russia was now a friendly country with shared interests. In dealing with the chaos across Israel's north-eastern border in Syria and in adjusting to the Russian military presence there after September 2015, Israel behaved prudently. It avoided military involvement in the Syrian free-for-all and successfully coordinated with the Russians the limited military action it reportedly did take in Syria.

But the Palestinian Issue Would Not Go Away

By 2016 Netanyahu was boasting openly about all these enhanced strategic relationships and linking them to the threats posed by Arab upheavals and Iranian power projection. The message was that on three geostrategic levels – the Arab heartland, the “periphery” surrounding the Islamist Middle East, and the Asian and Eurasian powers – Israel had powerful friends and meaningful ties that enabled it to defend its interests against crumbling Arab neighbours like Syria and militant Sunni and Shiite Islamists.

But that was not Netanyahu's only message or his only motive for weaving these ties. He had a Palestinian problem that he could not and would not solve. To be sure, as Israel approached the fiftieth anniversary of the June 1967 occupation of the West Bank, Gaza Strip, East Jerusalem and Golan Heights, there was plenty of blame for the absence of solutions to spread around among Palestinian and other Arab leaders as well. Indeed, in the specific case of the Golan Heights, Netanyahu could point to the anarchy in Syria, breathe a sigh of relief that neither he nor his predecessors had done a territories-for-peace deal with the Assads, father and son, and suggest that the world drop this issue from its agenda and recognize Israel's 1981 annexation of the Heights within the framework of whatever end-game emerged in Syria. Little wonder that Netanyahu was successfully entering into strategic relationships with a host of governments that were so concerned about Iranian power projection, ISIS and al-Qaeda and so grateful for Israel's intelligence and operational cooperation that they were dropping their traditional condi-

tion for doing so – Israeli-Palestinian peace – and radically downgrading even their lip service to the Palestinian issue. From New Delhi to Cairo, from Athens to Riyadh, the Islamist threat now seemingly justified relegating the demand for a Palestinian state to the diplomatic back burner.

An “Arab Solution”?

For their part, Israel's newfound strategic partners understood this partly as a necessary exercise in realpolitik prioritizing and partly as an acknowledgement that they were fed up with the Palestinian leadership and its insistence on impossible conditions like the “right of return” to Israel of all five million 1948 Palestinian refugees and their descendants. Netanyahu, however, proceeded to argue that no longer was a Palestinian solution the necessary predecessor to normalization with the Arab world but quite the opposite: he would prove that better strategic ties with the Arab world would make it easier to solve the Palestinian issue, as friendly Arab states would contribute security guarantees and refugee solutions.

In this spirit the Israeli right and many from the political centre as well, despairing of peace and recognizing the increasing irreversibility of the West Bank and East Jerusalem settlement project, where fully 10% of Israeli Jews now resided, proceeded to turn the 2002 Arab Peace Initiative on its head. The Saudi-sponsored and Arab League-endorsed Arab Peace Initiative (API) had offered Israel peace, security benefits and normalization with all Arab states if first it resolved the Palestinian and Golan issues. Now Israel proposed, on the basis of relations that appeared to be improving because of shared threats and despite the absence of a Palestinian solution, that the sequence be reversed. In July 2016, Netanyahu told the Israel National Security College that Israel “used to say that as soon as peace breaks out with the Palestinians, we can achieve peace with the entire Arab world. I am increasingly convinced that the process can work in the other direction too, and that normalization with the Arab world can help us to advance toward peace between us and the Palestinians.”⁴

Yet there were no serious takers for Netanyahu's new reverse paradigm of Israel-Arab peace. Indeed, in the

course of making new friends regionally and globally, Netanyahu had lost the trust of the West. France, Britain and Germany were fed up with his broken promises regarding the Palestinians and his settlement expansion. And then there was the US under President Obama, whom Netanyahu did not trust from the start, whose repeated admonitions to the effect that settlement expansion would doom Israel as a Jewish and democratic state Netanyahu flouted, and the dignity of whose office Netanyahu disparaged when he insisted in March 2015 on appealing directly to Congress to thwart the Iran nuclear deal.

Conclusion: Mixed Results

One challenge was immediate. All this Western anger, coupled with the international community's ongoing commitment to the Palestinians, came to a head on 23 December 2016 in a unanimous UN Security Council vote (the US abstaining) for Resolution 2334 condemning Israel's settlement expansion. Israel's expanding regional and global security cooperation relationships went by the wayside. Netanyahu's gamble on minimizing the Palestinian issue through cooperation against militant Islam had in this instance failed abysmally. And his reading of the Obama Administration – he prided himself on his understanding of the United States, where he had spent his teenage years and later served as an Israeli diplomat – was wrong.

Thus Netanyahu's campaign to acquire strategic allies regionally and globally, and to do so at the expense of the Palestinian issue, had by the end of 2016 registered both successes and failures. The enhanced security cooperation and enhanced Israeli arms and cyber sales were undeniable; yet the Palestinian issue remained as problematic as ever.

By 2017 Netanyahu hoped that incoming US President Donald Trump, with his promise of support for the settlements and recognition of Israel's capital in united Jerusalem, would prove to be the harbinger of a rightist, pro-Israel swing throughout the West. Early indications however were ambiguous and dictated to Netanyahu a more cautious Israeli approach to both the US and the Palestinian issue.

⁴ MUALEM, Mazal. “Netanyahu's new worldview,” *Al-Monitor*, 12 August 2016.