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JULY/AUGUST 2016

# FOREIGN AFFAIRS



## The Struggle for Israel

FOREIGN AFFAIRS

JULY/AUGUST 2016 • VOLUME 95 • NUMBER 4 • THE STRUGGLE FOR ISRAEL

# THE STRUGGLE FOR ISRAEL

It's common knowledge that the Middle East is in turmoil these days and that there are major tensions between the United States and one of its crucial allies in the region, Israel. Less commonly understood are the profound ways in which Israel itself is changing.

In important respects, the country no longer resembles the image many Westerners still picture—the liberal Zionist state of David Ben-Gurion, Abba Eban, Golda Meir, and Yitzhak Rabin. The socialist Ashkenazi elite that used to dominate Israel's politics has long since fractured and faded away. Sephardic Jews, Soviet immigrants, settlers, the religious right, secular Jews, and Arab Israelis now vie for influence. In foreign policy, meanwhile, what Israel stands for, and who it stands with, is also in play.

To scout this new landscape, we've turned to some of Israel's leading politicians and observers. What emerges is a picture of a country enjoying a rare moment of relative peace with most of its neighbors, even as it experiences intensifying conflicts at home.

Leading off the package are interviews with two of Israel's most powerful women: Ayelet Shaked, the current justice minister, and Tzipi Livni, a former justice minister and former foreign minister. Their contrasting visions starkly illuminate the country's current political divide.

Next, Aluf Benn, editor in chief of *Haaretz*, describes Israel's transformation through the story of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's long career. A moderate when circumstances required

it, Netanyahu now leads the most right-wing government in Israel's history, which Benn argues is allowing Netanyahu to realize his long-held dream: replacing Israel's old moderate and secular elite with a new hard-line and religious one.

Robert Danin, an American diplomatic veteran of the now-moribund peace process, examines the new threats and often overlooked new opportunities facing Israel's foreign-policy makers. As'ad Ghanem of the University of Haifa explores the plight of Israel's Arab citizens, who are enjoying unprecedented material gains even as they face unprecedented threats to their political rights. And Amos Harel, one of Israel's leading defense analysts, describes the challenges facing the country's vaunted military, including the recent wave of "lone wolf" knife attacks.

Finally, Martin Kramer of Shalem College offers a vigorous dissent, noting that in many respects, Israel is better off today than ever before. What has changed, in his view, is less Israel than the attitudes of others, including Washington—whose fecklessness and withdrawal from the Middle East represent a real but manageable problem for the Jewish state.

Israelis disagreeing with one another is hardly new. But the bitterness of today's fights underscores the depth of the changes and choices facing the country.

—Jonathan Tepperman, *Managing Editor*



*Israel—at least the largely secular and progressive version of Israel that once captured the world’s imagination—is over.*

*—Aluf Benn*

|                                   |    |  |    |
|-----------------------------------|----|--|----|
| A Conversation With Ayelet Shaked | 2  | Israel’s Second-Class Citizens           |    |
| A Conversation With Tzipi Livni   | 10 | <i>As’ad Ghanem</i>                      | 37 |
| The End of the Old Israel         |    | Israel’s Evolving Military               |    |
| <i>Aluf Benn</i>                  | 16 | <i>Amos Harel</i>                        | 43 |
| Israel Among the Nations          |    | Israel and the Post-American Middle East |    |
| <i>Robert M. Danin</i>            | 28 | <i>Martin Kramer</i>                     | 51 |

# Ministering Justice

## A Conversation With Ayelet Shaked

**A**yelet Shaked is a relative newcomer to Israeli politics. Shaked, 40, served as Benjamin Netanyahu's office manager before breaking with the prime minister and joining Naftali Bennett's Jewish Home party in 2012 and then winning election to the Knesset in 2013. Following the 2015 election, Shaked was named Israel's minister of justice. Since then, she has courted controversy with a number of moves that critics call undemocratic, such as promoting a bill that would highlight which nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) get a majority of their funding from foreign governments. Shaked, who worked as a software engineer before entering politics, recently spoke to *Foreign Affairs'* managing editor, Jonathan Tepperman, in Tel Aviv.

**You've been justice minister for a year now. Which accomplishments you are most proud of?**

One is the nomination of judges. I've already nominated 100 judges [to fill vacant posts], which is a lot. Also, we are doing a lot of things to reform the legal system, to alleviate court backlogs, to reform the bankruptcy law. I'm trying to find any business regulations that I can relax.

The transparency bill is also important, but it hasn't passed yet. And the terror

bill, which the Knesset has tried to pass for more than five years without success, will pass next month [in June]. It's also very important; it gives the Shabak [Israel's internal security service, also known as the Shin Bet] and the police new tools to fight terror.

**What kind of tools?**

For example, it allows them, in specific circumstances, to prohibit a suspect from seeing a lawyer for 21 days. Things like that.

**What's it like to be a leader of the Jewish Home—a political party known as the main voice for religious settlers—as a secular woman and Tel Aviv resident?**

The fact that I was elected to my post in an open party primary shows that Jewish Home voters are very open and very liberal. I see my party as a bridge between the Orthodox and the secular. We believe that we should all live together and respect one another.

**You currently serve under Prime Minister Netanyahu. You started your career working for him directly but then broke with him in 2012 and left Likud. What are the main differences today between you and Netanyahu, you and Likud?**

The main difference between the Jewish Home and Likud, apart from religion and ideology, is that we object to a Palestinian state, while Likud, and the prime minister, supported one.

To return to your earlier question, I'm also trying to promote Arab society in Israel, by creating new courts in Arab cities and appointing a woman as a *qadi* [an Islamic judge, with jurisdiction over family law] for the first time.

This interview has been edited and condensed.



*Shaked in Tel Aviv, February 2015*

**Are these reforms meant to address the inequalities between Arab Israelis and Jewish Israelis?**

There's no inequality. According to the law, everyone is equal. But of course, we need to invest more in some Arab towns. And the government just passed a big plan to do so.

**So the problem is not one of legal equality but one of resources?**

Yes, sometimes. But the government is now fixing that. And here in my ministry, nine percent of employees are Arabs or Druze.

**To return to politics, there are rumors that the prime minister is trying to create a big new party of the right, which would absorb all the smaller right-wing parties. What do you think of that?**

It's not something we've really talked about. I don't think it's realistic. But we'd never rule anything out.

**Some critics, including U.S. Ambassador Dan Shapiro, have criticized the NGO transparency bill as an attempt to muzzle dissent. Why is the bill necessary? Why publicly identify those NGOs that get more than half of their support from foreign governments?**

The amount of attention this bill is getting is absurd. There are so many other important things that we are working on, yet for some reason, this bill gets so much attention. It's just a transparency bill. If an NGO gets more than half of its money from a foreign government, it's the right of the citizens of Israel to know that. Why? Because some countries have found a way to interfere in the internal affairs of Israel—not through diplomacy but

by funding specific NGOs that serve their ideology.

**By “some countries,” do you mean the United States and Europe?**

Mainly Europe. And by the way, it's not that [such funding] won't be allowed. It's allowed in a democracy. But I think that the public has the right to know about it.

**Critics say that the real point of the law is to shame these organizations by making their members wear special badges in the Knesset and by imposing a public label that would damage these groups' legitimacy.**

First of all, the badges aren't part of the law. But by the way, every lobbyist in the Knesset needs to wear a badge. So even if the badges were in the law, it wouldn't be bad.

Second, it's not about shaming. It's about the right to know. That's all.

**Do you feel that foreign governments should not be funding NGOs in Israel?**

I think that foreign governments should not fund political NGOs in Israel. I don't think that the U.S. administration would like it if Israel, for example, were to fund an NGO in the United States that sued American soldiers for their service in Afghanistan.

**Do you see the NGOs that would be targeted by the law, such as Breaking the Silence, as foreign agents or threats to Israel?**

They are not threatening Israel. Our democracy is very strong; we can handle them. But I think they are doing damage to Israel outside the country, by spreading a lot of lies and distorting the picture. Sometimes if you only tell half a truth,

it's a lie. They take one specific case and generalize it, depict it as if it shows the way all soldiers behave. They're doing it on university campuses in the United States. It's causing damage to Israel.

**Would the legislation also affect groups on the right?**

I haven't checked which NGOs would be affected by the law.

**There will be four to five vacancies on the Supreme Court next year, and you'll get to help nominate the replacements. You've been quite critical of the court in the past and have tried to limit its ability to overrule decisions by the executive or the Knesset. What role do you think a supreme court should play in a democratic society?**

A very important role, of course. The court's job is to resolve disputes and prevent the state from carrying out actions that are illegal. I criticize the court when it intervenes in matters of policy, not in matters of law.

**Do you have a problem in principle with judicial review based on interpretation of Israel's Basic Laws?**

No, I don't. But I think that [the court] should use that power very, very rarely, and only in very prominent cases where there's been a violation of the law—not on questions of policy.

**In the United States, the Supreme Court uses what it calls "the political question doctrine" to avoid getting involved in questions it deems largely political.**

**Does a similar doctrine exist here?**

Yes, but the reality is different. The U.S. Supreme Court is also activist. But U.S. Supreme Court justices are selected by politicians. In Israel, it's done by com-



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mittee. I'm the head of the committee, but there are three Supreme Court justices on it as well, and we can't make a selection without them. So the Supreme Court judges have a lot of influence over the selection of their replacements.

**Would you like to change that?**

There are a few things we cannot do in this coalition. I'm not going to bang my head against a wall. But we do favor a law that would give judges the formal power to cancel a law. This power was never given to them by law; they just took it. But the law would also give the Knesset the power to override the court, like Parliament can in Canada, for example.

**But in Canada, Parliament can only overrule the court on constitutional issues if it specifies that it is doing so notwithstanding the court's opposition. That acts as a check on Parliament.**

What we're talking about in Israel is requiring a big majority, more than 60 percent of the Knesset, to do so.

**Aren't you worried this could give rise to a tyranny of the majority? Because the purpose of an unelected judiciary is to act as a check on the legislature to prevent pure majoritarian rule.**

I think that if you require a vote [to overrule the court] to pass by 65 percent, then I don't see the Knesset using this power very often. It will be a rare occasion.

**Freedom House recently downgraded Israel's standing due to what it claims are new restrictions on the freedom of the press. And last week, the deputy chief of staff of the IDF said that the current climate of intolerance, violence, and**

**self-destruction reminds him of Germany in the 1930s. How do you interpret such criticisms?**

You have to distinguish between the two. First of all, Yair Golan [the IDF's deputy chief of staff] retracted what he said and said there is no room for such a comparison.

Regarding [Freedom House], I want to hear facts, not talk about atmosphere. Israel is one of the strongest democracies in the world, with close to absolute freedom of expression. You can see that by looking at our social networks.

**So you don't worry that any of the measures you've mentioned could chill freedom of expression here?**

No, and they're not intended to.

**What about the new bill that would allow the suspension of Knesset members for making anti-Zionist statements?**

I don't like this law, and I don't support it. I don't think it's necessary. I only voted for it out of coalition discipline. But it's unnecessary. I think that Knesset members should say whatever they want. And by the way, no one will use this law.

**You recently proposed extending Israeli civil law to settlements in the West Bank.**

No. Don't believe all the things that you read in the newspapers.

Today in Israel, when a law is passed in the Knesset, the military authority in Judea and Samaria has discretion over how to apply it in the settlements. What I've proposed is that we set up a team that would be manned both by the Ministry of Justice and by the Ministry of Defense to immediately translate new laws into military regulations, rather than letting it happen sporadically.



**You've made it clear in the past that you favor annexation of large parts of the West Bank—Area C, which is something like 61 percent of the territory. So it's not surprising that some of your critics have called this move a first step toward annexation. Is there anything to that?**

No. We aren't talking about annexing Judea and Samaria. The proposal has been criticized because, like you, no one understands what it's saying. Politicians on the left want to use it to score political points. No one has bothered to understand what I really meant.

**Speaking of annexation, what timeline do you envisage?**

It's not realistic today. What I'm saying is that the two-state solution will not happen in the near future. The gaps between the Palestinians and the Israelis are much too big to bridge. Arafat, Abu Mazen [Mahmoud Abbas], Olmert, Barak—they all tried to do so many times, and they failed. And the Gaza withdrawal showed the Israeli public that even though we withdrew down to the last inch, we only got terror. You know, Einstein defined insanity as when you do the same thing over and over again and expect different results.

That's why today the majority of Israelis don't think it's realistic to establish a Palestinian state. So it's not that I think we can annex Area C today, but I think it is something that we need to talk about, to put on the table.

**You make it sound like your objection to the two-state solution is more practical than ideological.**

It's just not realistic. All the countries around us are collapsing, and there is a huge battle in the Middle East between

the Shia and the Sunnis, and there are terror organizations all over. Israel really is like a villa in the jungle. And the situation in Judea and Samaria for the Palestinians—OK, it's not perfect, but it's OK. They are living their lives; they are selecting their leaders. The situation could be far worse than it is now.

Second, I do believe in the historic right of the Jewish people to the land of Israel.

**So how do you see the relationship with the Palestinians evolving? Aren't you worried that as conditions continue to deteriorate, their anger will continue to grow?**

I don't know if what you're saying is true. Israel-Palestinian security coordination is strong. I think that Israel and the international community need to invest in the economy of the Palestinians. Maybe this will help to weaken Hamas. I think if we are willing to push for prosperity and to invest in a real economy, and if the international community would not just transfer money but give the Palestinians independent energy and stronger industry, it could help.

I also support building a port for Gaza by building an island in the sea.

**Tell me a bit more about the situation of Arab Israelis. Do you feel that there are major problems there that need to be addressed?**

I think that the government is now doing the right things.

**But a lot of damage was done by the last government, which raised the threshold of votes needed for a party to enter the Knesset.**

I supported leaving the situation as it

was and not raising the threshold. That was unnecessary. But the goal was not to hurt the Arabs but rather to strengthen the government.

**Whatever the intentions were, that rule, and the comments the prime minister made during the last election about Arabs being bused in droves to polling stations, created a lot of ill feeling among the Arab Israeli population. Are the moves you're making now an attempt to address that sense of alienation?**

Many politicians said worse things than the prime minister did during the election. But we are doing what we're doing because we think it's the right thing to do.

**How do you assess Israel's security today? Some people argue that Israel is more secure than it's ever been, because for the first time in its history, war with an organized Arab army is impossible. But others argue that the region is more dangerous than ever, because of the fragility of Israel's new Arab friends, because of the Shiite-Sunni divide, because of Iran, and because of ISIS. Which view is correct?**

Both of them are correct. You are right: there is no threat that a big Arab army will invade Israel. But on the other hand, there are many other threats. First of all, of course, is Iran and its bomb. The agreement with Iran did two things. First, they will have a bomb in ten years. They will have a bomb. It's just a matter of a decision. In ten years, if they decide to have a bomb, they'll have one a few months later. This is a huge threat to Israel.

The other bad thing about this agreement is that it caused an arms race in the Middle East. The United States wants to give more arms to moderate

Sunni states. And part of the weapons embargo on Iran will be removed in five years. And [the Iranians] will now get a lot of money, so they will arm themselves.

Another threat is the nonconventional arms race. Saudi Arabia and Egypt now see that Iran will have a bomb in ten years. So they also want a bomb.

**What about the broader international situation? Do you worry that Israel is becoming more isolated internationally, because of the BDS [Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions] movement or because of the friction between the leadership here and that in Washington?**

I believe that the U.S. administration— it doesn't matter which administration— will stand behind Israel in every bad situation. The administration will understand that Israel is its ally and the only democracy in the Middle East.

And I expect the American administration to fight the BDS movement on university campuses.

***The New York Times* reported a few weeks ago that tensions between Netanyahu and President Obama were now delaying the passage of a huge new aid bill the two countries are negotiating.**

I can only say that I hope they will resolve it.

**Do you ever worry that Israel is too dependent on the United States?**

The support of the United States is very important. But I'm not worried that someday we might need to get along without it. If that does happen, we will succeed. But I don't see it happening. I hope it won't. 🌍



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# Anger and Hope

## A Conversation With Tzipi Livni

**T**zipi Livni has been called the most powerful woman in Israel since Golda Meir. Born to a prominent right-wing family, Livni spent several years working for the Mossad, Israel's foreign intelligence service, before entering politics. In the decades since, she has held eight different cabinet posts—including minister of justice and minister of foreign affairs—and undergone a dramatic ideological evolution. First elected to the Knesset as a member of Likud, in 2005 she joined Kadima, a new centrist party founded by then Prime Minister Ariel Sharon. A staunch supporter of the peace process, Livni created her own party, Hatnua, in 2012 and then joined forces with Labor to form the Zionist Union before the 2015 election. Now a leading member of the opposition, Livni recently spoke to *Foreign Affairs'* managing editor, Jonathan Tepperman, in Tel Aviv.

**When you speak to Israelis today, you're apt to hear one of two competing narratives. According to the first, things are better than ever: the economy is thriving, most of Israel's enemies are in disarray, and the current government reflects the will of the people.**

**The other narrative is the complete opposite: the region is more dangerous than ever, Israel faces growing interna-**

**tional isolation, and the current government is steadily reducing civil liberties and freedoms. What's your version?**

It's very clear that here in Israel there are now not only two different states of mind but also two different views about what Israel needs and what Israel is. And your view of reality depends on which of these two views of Israel you hold.

**Does that mean Israel is now more polarized than ever before?**

Yes, yes. It started before the last election, but the election crystallized the idea—quoting Netanyahu—that there's a gap between these two camps. He was right then. And the things that he and his government have done since then have made this gap grow wider. Those that are not in the government feel that what is happening is completely against our understanding of what Israel is, what its values are, what Judaism is, what democracy is.

**Is Israeli democracy in decline?**

We are fighting to keep Israel a democracy—not just in terms of its electoral system but also in terms of its values. A lot of those on the other side see democracy only as a question of who is the majority. This is why they are trying to weaken the role of the Supreme Court. And this is why Netanyahu wants to control the press.

In a democracy, you need to have a strong judicial system. You need freedom of speech, you need art, and you need a free press. And all these things are under threat right now. We in the opposition need to fight for these values. We need to push the idea that democracy is a matter of values, and not just the rule of the majority.

This interview has been edited and condensed.



*Livni in Tel Aviv, January 2013*

**Do you think you can win this battle? The right has controlled Israeli politics for years now. The current government is the most hard-line in Israel's history. Netanyahu seems to have very few plausible challengers. Given all of that, plus the country's changing demographics, plus the public's frustration with the peace process, plus the chaos in the region, can the left or the center really make a comeback?**

The good thing about having a government like this one is that it makes everything very clear. The more bluntly they speak, the easier it becomes to rally the support of our own camp.

What we need to do now is to go to our base and say, "Listen, it's now clear what this government represents. If they continue, they will take us to the point of no return in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. They will change the nature of Israeli democracy."

**And is your own camp big enough to win an election?**

It's 50-50—for now. You are right: Israel is changing in terms of demographics. But when [the government] says that the majority rules, they're wrong, because Ayelet Shaked and Naftali Bennett represent a minority in Israel. Their ideology of a Greater Israel, and an Israel that's more Jewish than it is democratic—that's a minority opinion here. What we need to do is to find and speak to those who are our natural partners.

**But success also requires leadership among the various parties in the center and on the left, right? They must be prepared to join forces.**

It requires that voters understand that in order to win, they need to work with

one leader, one party, and not spread their votes all over. But as time passes, people's despair is growing. So it depends on us. What I'm trying to do right now is to say, let's put on the table our basic vision for the future of the state of Israel. Not a specific platform, but a general view of what needs to be done about peace and security. And let's speak about the nature of Israel as a Jewish democratic state. It's not more Jewish and less democratic, or more democratic and less Jewish. And of course we have to share our views about the economy and society.

We need to put it all on the table, not only for voters but also for the heads of the different parties. They also need to make a choice. Everybody needs to take a side.

**Ever since 1996, Netanyahu has said openly that the way to create a permanent right-wing government in Israel is to change the elite—not just by working through politics but by creating new think tanks, changing the media, changing culture, all to replace the old secular Ashkenazi elite with a new, more Sephardic, religious, right-wing one.** So said the Ashkenazi leader.

**Well, that is an irony. But is he succeeding?**

For me, this is not a problem. I know how [the right] feels, OK? I was there. I was born to parents who were not accepted by the establishment in the days when the state of Israel was created. And those Jews who came from Arab states were also not accepted. They felt that the establishment patronized them. I can understand that feeling.

So giving more attention to Sephardim and everything—it's more than OK. It's

necessary. But what Likud is doing now is just what was once done to them.

And it's even more problematic than that, because they're trying to delegitimize those that criticize the government. Netanyahu is using the resentment of those who felt patronized by the old elite to shut the mouths of those who criticize him.

**Is there a significant difference between what he wants and what his allies, like Bennett and Shaked and Regev, want?**

For Netanyahu, it's not about ideology. It's about using the feelings of those who were patronized in the past to say, "OK, now we are taking over, and you will get our support."

For the others you mentioned, it is about ideology. So they and Netanyahu have different reasons for doing what they do, but the outcome is the same.

For us, it's about keeping Israel a Jewish democratic state. The only way to do that is by dividing the ancient land of Israel into two different states. If we fail to do so, or if we annex the territories, we will face a clash between Israel as a democracy and Israel as a Jewish state.

A vast majority of Israelis want to keep Israel a democracy. If you asked them, they might say that they are right wing. But if the next question was, would you support a two-state solution with security? they would say yes.

**A moment ago, you spoke about the need to convince voters of the stakes involved in choosing you instead of the right. Yet as we speak, the leader of your own coalition is in talks with the prime minister about forming a national unity government. What do you think of this? My responsibility is to ask, how can I**

serve my ideology and my voters? So the question is, will joining the government allow us to implement our vision, or serve Netanyahu's vision?

To answer that, you have to ask, if we joined the government, would it be to create a true unity government or just a broader coalition for Netanyahu? Those are two different things. Unity governments are based on an understanding among the major parties that there are things we can agree on and implement together. This is not what Netanyahu is proposing. He is talking about a broader coalition to help him and his natural partners.

So I'm against it, because it would betray our voters and what I believe in.

**Would you be prepared to leave the party if it joined the government?**

I have my own party.

**Then would you leave the Zionist Union, your coalition with Labor?**

I hope that will not happen, but yes. What's the use of being in politics if it means serving someone else's vision?

You asked me before about Netanyahu, whether he thinks like the Jewish Home or he thinks like us. I'd answer by quoting that old line: "Tell me who your friends are, and I'll tell you who you are."

**Let's return to the peace process. You've spoken in the past about the dangers of not doing anything to address the situation. But given the disarray on the Palestinian side, and the fact that Abu Mazen's [Mahmoud Abbas'] days are numbered, what can be done?**

Israel needs to decide which road we want to take; we need to decide on our destination. If the destination is Greater

Israel, it doesn't matter whether there's a partner on the other side.

But if your destination is a secure Israel that is Jewish and democratic, then it can't be on the entire land. That is our GPS setting. To get there, we'd prefer to have an agreement with the Palestinians, because that is the way to create a secure border, a demilitarized Palestinian state, and an end to the conflict. Because you can't end the conflict without their consent.

And if we cannot end the conflict tomorrow morning, let's at least start moving toward our goal. That means not doing things that take you in the opposite direction. Netanyahu says his destination is two states for two peoples. But he's going in the other direction.

**So what do you propose?**

First, we need to win the trust of the international community and the Palestinians by saying this is where we want to go. Not for you, not as a favor to the United States. But because it's in our own interests.

Second, we would stop doing things that serve the different vision for the state of Israel.

**Such as?**

Stop expanding settlements, especially those outside the fence that are not going to be part of Israel. Then let's change the atmosphere. Let's show we're serious. Let's give the Palestinians the right to build in Area C. Let's see whether these and other confidence-building measures can create enough trust to relaunch negotiations.

And then in the negotiations, we need to find out what they really want. Are they willing to end the conflict

and take steps that would serve their interests as well?

And we need to work completely differently with the international community. We have lost their trust by speaking about two states but then acting in ways that serve the vision of a Greater Israel.

There are certain interests that nobody in Israel would give up. Security: a Palestinian state should be demilitarized. And the major settlement blocs would become part of Israel.

**Is there anyone to negotiate with on the other side, or does this have to wait until a new Palestinian leader replaces Abu Mazen?**

I'd prefer to work with them directly. But if they are not willing, let's start working also with the international community.

**Do you see unilateral separation as a last option, if necessary?**

As long as it moves us toward a two-state solution. We can act with the Palestinians or without the Palestinians. But unilateralism would not bring us to the end of the conflict.

**How worried are you about Israel's growing isolation?**

First, I want to make it clear that nothing I suggested would be done to appease the international community. Anything we do has to be in our own interests. But by not acting in our own interests, we are affecting our relations with the international community. And Israel's security is based on its relationship with the U.S. It's not a question whether [the Americans] like us or love us; it's about our security. And it's not just about



money or weapons. They also give us legitimacy to act against terror; they have their veto on the Security Council.

Somebody recently said to me that for the United States, Israel is becoming just another state. That's not good news. Netanyahu and others in the government say that foreign attitudes have nothing to do with what we do but are based on who we are: the world is anti-Semitic, so they will hate us no matter what we do.

What I would say is that there is anti-Semitism in the world, but not everybody is anti-Semitic. And instead of giving the anti-Semites an opportunity to further isolate us, let's isolate them. Let's build a wall between them and those that are criticizing Israel because of its policies or because they don't understand us.

**Do you worry that Israel is too dependent on the United States?**

The United States is the anchor. I also believe that we should have better relations with Europe; we need to work with everybody. But the United States is the anchor.

**Looking at all the recent changes in Israel's region, do you see other opportunities, as well as threats? For example, relations with the Sunni monarchies have never been better. And the Arab Peace Initiative is still on the table. Is that worth exploring?**

Yes. The original idea behind Israel was to take the Jewish people out of a ghetto and create a sovereign, independent state. So Israel shouldn't be a new ghetto, a big ghetto in the Middle East.

There are opportunities here. We and the Sunni Arab states share an

understanding. We share the same view of extreme Islamists, of terrorist organizations, of Iran.

But the glass ceiling that's constraining relations between Israel and the Arab Sunni world is the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

So our strategy should be a dual strategy: On the one hand, we should act against the extremists, against Hamas. But on the other, we need to help those that are willing to work with us by making all those gestures I mentioned earlier. I have had discussions with Arab League representatives about this. I asked, "Is this a take-it-or-leave-it deal?" And they said, "It's negotiable." I said, "Great. Should I negotiate with you?" And they said, "No. Negotiate with the Palestinians." So in the end, it's all connected.

**You sound surprisingly optimistic, given what's happening here and in your neighborhood.**

I'm not optimistic, but without hope, you can't survive in this swamp called politics.

I once heard a story about a Western doctor working in Africa who worked 24/7 with victims of terrible atrocities. Someone asked him, "Where do you find the strength to keep doing this night and day?" "Two words," he said, "anger and hope."

I have both. 🌍

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# The End of the Old Israel

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## How Netanyahu Has Transformed the Nation

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*Aluf Benn*

Israel—at least the largely secular and progressive version of Israel that once captured the world’s imagination—is over. Although that Israel was always in some ways a fantasy, the myth was at least grounded in reality. Today that reality has changed, and the country that has replaced it is profoundly different from the one its founders imagined almost 70 years ago. Since the last elections, in March 2015, a number of slow-moving trends have accelerated dramatically. Should they continue, they could soon render the country unrecognizable.

Already, the transformation has been dramatic. Israel’s current leaders—headed by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who metamorphosed after the election from a risk-averse conservative into a right-wing radical—see democracy as synonymous with unchecked majority rule and have no patience for restraints such as judicial review or the protection of minorities. In their view, Israel is a Jewish state and a democratic state—in that order. Only Jews should enjoy full rights, while gentiles should be treated with suspicion. Extreme as it sounds, this belief is now widely held: a Pew

public opinion survey published in March found that 79 percent of Jewish Israelis supported “preferential treatment” for Jews—a thinly veiled euphemism for discrimination against non-Jews.

Meanwhile, the two-state solution to the conflict with the Palestinians has been taken off the table, and Israel is steadily making its occupation of East Jerusalem and the West Bank permanent. Human rights groups and dissidents who dare criticize the occupation and expose its abuses are denounced by officials, and the government has sought to pass new laws restricting their activities. Arab-Jewish relations within the country have hit a low point, and Israel’s society is breaking down into its constituent tribes.

Netanyahu thrives on such tribalism, which serves his lifelong goal of replacing Israel’s traditional elite with one more in tune with his philosophy. The origins of all these changes predate the current prime minister, however. To truly understand them, one must look much further back in Israel’s history: to the country’s founding, in 1948.

### THE OLD MAN AND THE NEW JEW

Modern Israel was created by a group of secular socialists led by David Ben-Gurion, who would become the state’s first prime minister. “The Old Man,” as he was known, sought to create a homeland for a new type of Jew: a warrior-pioneer who would plow the land with a gun on his back and then read poetry around a bonfire when the battle was won. (This “new Jew” was mythologized, most memorably, by Paul Newman in the film *Exodus*.) Although a civilian, Ben-Gurion was a martial leader. He oversaw the fledgling state’s

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victory in its War of Independence against Israel's Arab neighbors and the Palestinians, most of whom were then exiled. And when the war was over, the Old Man oversaw the creation of the Israel Defense Forces (IDF), which he designed to serve as (among other things) the new country's main tool for turning its polyglot Jewish immigrants into Hebrew-speaking citizens.

Ben-Gurion was a leftist but not a liberal. Following independence, he put Israel's remaining Arab residents under martial law (a condition that lasted until 1966) and expropriated much of their land, which he gave to Jewish communities. His party, Mapai (the forerunner of Labor), controlled the economy and the distribution of jobs. Ben-Gurion and his cohort were almost all Ashkenazi (of eastern European origin), and they discriminated against the Sephardic Jews (known in Israel as the Mizrahim), who came from Arab states such as Iraq, Morocco, Tunisia, and Yemen. Ben-Gurion also failed to appreciate the power of religion, which he believed would wither away when confronted with secular modernity. He therefore allowed the Orthodox to preserve their educational autonomy under the new state—thereby ensuring and underwriting the creation of future generations of religious voters.

For all Ben-Gurion's flaws, his achievements were enormous and should not be underestimated: he created one of the most developed states in the postcolonial world, with a world-class military, including a nuclear deterrent, and top scientific and technological institutions. His reliance on the IDF as a melting pot also worked well, effectively assimilating great numbers of new

Israelis. This reliance on the military—along with its battlefield victories in 1948, 1956, and 1967—helped cement the centrality of the IDF in Israeli society. To this day, serving in the military's more prestigious units is the surest way to get ahead in the country. The army has supplied many of the nation's top leaders, from Yitzhak Rabin and Ezer Weizman to Ehud Barak and Ariel Sharon, and every chief of staff or intelligence head instantly becomes an unofficial candidate for high office on retirement.

The first major challenge to Ben-Gurion's idea of Israel arrived on Yom Kippur in 1973, when Egypt and Syria launched a surprise attack that managed to catch the IDF unawares. Although Israel ultimately won the war, it suffered heavy losses, and the massive intelligence failure traumatized the nation. Like the United Kingdom after World War I, Israel emerged technically victorious but shorn of its sense of invincibility.

Less than four years later, Menachem Begin—the founder of Israel's right wing—capitalized on this unhappiness and on Sephardic grievances to hand Labor its first-ever defeat at the polls. Taking power at the head of a new coalition called Likud (Unity), Begin forged an alliance with Israel's religious parties, which felt more at home with a Sabbath-observing conservative. To sweeten the deal, his government accelerated the building of Jewish settlements in the West Bank (which appealed to religious Zionists) and offered numerous concessions to the ultra-Orthodox, such as generous educational subsidies.

Begin was a conservative and nationalist. But the decades he'd spent in the opposition had taught him to

respect dissent and debate. As prime minister, therefore, he always defended judicial independence, and he refrained from purging Labor loyalists from the top echelons of the civil service and the IDF. As a consequence, his revolution, important though it was, was only a partial one. Under Begin's leadership, Israel's old left-wing elite lost its cabinet seats. But it preserved much of its influence, holding on to top positions in powerful institutions such as the media and academia. And the Supreme Court remained stocked with justices who, while officially nonpartisan, nevertheless represented a liberal worldview of human and civil rights.

### **BIBI'S BAPTISM**

Although Likud has governed Israel for most of the years since then, the left's ongoing control over many other facets of life has given rise to a deep sense of resentment on the right. No one has felt that grievance more keenly than Netanyahu, who long dreamed of finishing Begin's incomplete revolution. "Bibi," as Netanyahu is known, first won the premiership in 1996, but it would take him decades to accomplish his goal.

Netanyahu's initial election came shortly after the assassination of Rabin. The years prior to Rabin's death had been dominated by the Oslo peace process between Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), and that same peace process would become the focus of his successor's first term as well.

Netanyahu opposed Oslo from the very beginning. Then as now, he saw Israel as a Jewish community besieged by hostile Arabs and Muslims who wanted to destroy it. He considered the Arab-Israeli conflict a perpetual fact of life

that could be managed but would never be resolved. The West—which, in his view, was anti-Semitic, indifferent, or both—couldn't be counted on to help, and so Israel's leaders were duty bound to prevent a second Holocaust through a combination of smart diplomacy and military prowess. And they couldn't afford to worry about what the rest of the world thought of them. Indeed, one of Netanyahu's main domestic selling points has always been his willingness to stand up to established powers, whether they take the form of the U.S. president or the UN General Assembly (where Netanyahu served as Israel's representative from 1984 to 1988 and first caught his nation's attention).

Netanyahu loves lecturing gentiles in his perfect English, and much of the Israeli public loves these performances. He may go overboard at times—as when, last October, he suggested that Adolf Hitler had gotten the idea to kill Europe's Jews from Amin al-Husseini, the grand mufti of Jerusalem during World War II. Historians of all stripes scoffed at the claim, but many ordinary Israelis were indifferent to its inaccuracy.

During his first term, Netanyahu connected his domestic and international agendas by blaming the leftism of Israel's old elite for the country's foreign policy mistakes. To prevent more missteps in the future, he borrowed a page from the U.S. conservative playbook and vowed to fight the groupthink at Israel's universities and on its editorial boards—a way of thinking that, he argued, had led the country to Oslo. In a 1996 interview with the *Haaretz* columnist Ari Shavit, Netanyahu complained about his delegitimization "by the nomenklatura of the old regime," adding that "the problem



*Changing of the guard: Netanyahu at a memorial service for Ben-Gurion, November 2014*

is that the intellectual structure of Israeli society is unbalanced.” He pledged to create new, more conservative institutions to rewrite the national narrative.

But Netanyahu’s political inexperience worked against him. His tenure was rocked by controversy, from his reckless provocations of the Palestinians and of Jordan to a scandal caused by his wife’s mistreatment of household employees. Israel’s old elites closed ranks, and, with the support of the Clinton administration, they forced Netanyahu into another deal with the Palestinian leader Yasir Arafat. The 1998 Wye River memorandum—the last formal agreement that Israel and the Palestinians have signed to this day—triggered early elections in May 1999, after several small, hard-right parties abandoned Netanyahu’s coalition in protest. Barak and the Labor Party emerged victorious.

Both Barak, a decorated former head of the IDF, and Sharon, who replaced Netanyahu at the helm of Likud and became prime minister himself in 2001, represented a return to the Ben-Gurion model of farmer turned soldier turned statesman. Their ascent thus restored the old order—at least temporarily—and made Netanyahu seem like a historical fluke.

#### **A MODERATE MASK**

But Netanyahu saw things differently, and he spent the next decade plotting his return to power. Following Sharon’s reelection in 2003, Netanyahu became finance minister, although he resigned on the eve of the August 2005 unilateral pullout from Gaza. When Sharon created a new centrist party, Kadima (Forward), shortly after the withdrawal, Netanyahu took over the remnants of Likud. But he lost the next election, in March 2006,

to Ehud Olmert, who had replaced the ailing Sharon as head of Kadima.

Olmert had pledged to follow through on his mentor's vision by withdrawing Israel from most of the West Bank. But in July, his plans were disrupted when he let Hezbollah draw him into a pointless and badly managed war in Lebanon. His subsequent effort to negotiate a comprehensive peace deal with the Palestinians, launched in Annapolis, Maryland, in late 2007, led nowhere. Meanwhile, Netanyahu's credibility and popularity were boosted that same year when Hamas, well armed with rockets, seized control of Gaza—just as he'd predicted. So when Olmert announced his resignation over corruption charges in the summer of 2008 (he ultimately went to jail earlier this year on different charges), Netanyahu was ready to pounce.

His revival was further aided by the sudden appearance in 2007 of what would become the most important of what Netanyahu called independent sources of thought. *Israel Hayom* (Israel Today) is a free daily newspaper owned by the American casino magnate Sheldon Adelson, and ever since its launch, it has provided Netanyahu with a loud and supportive media megaphone. By 2010, *Israel Hayom* had become the country's most-read weekday newspaper, printing 275,000 copies a day. And its front page has consistently read like Bibi's daily message: lauding his favorites, denouncing his rivals, boasting about Israel's achievements, and downplaying negative news.

With Olmert out of the picture, Netanyahu returned to office on March 31, 2009. Eager to prove that he was no longer the scandal-plagued

firebrand who'd been voted out of office a decade before, however, and fearing pressure from the new U.S. president, Barack Obama, he once again was forced to shelve his long-term plans for elite replacement. Instead of undermining his enemies, he shifted to the center, recruiting several retired Likud liberals to vouch for the "new Bibi" and join his cabinet, and forging a coalition with Labor under Barak, who stayed on as defense minister (a job he'd held under Olmert). Together, Netanyahu and Barak spent much of the next four years working on an ultimately unrealized plan to bomb Iran's nuclear facilities.

In June 2009, ten days after Obama's Cairo address, Netanyahu sought to reinforce his new centrist credentials by endorsing the idea of Palestinian statehood in a speech. True to form, however, the prime minister imposed a condition: the Palestinians would first have to recognize Israel as a Jewish state. Mahmoud Abbas, the Palestinian president, instantly rejected the idea. But the move enhanced Netanyahu's moderate credentials anyway.

And it helped get Obama off his back—but not before the U.S. president convinced Netanyahu to accept a ten-month freeze on new residential construction in the West Bank settlements. The freeze was meaningless, however, since it didn't change the facts on the ground or facilitate serious peace talks. And soon after it expired, Republicans won control of the House of Representatives in the U.S. midterm election, creating a firewall against any further pressure from Washington. Obama soon lost interest in the thankless peace process. Although his rocky relationship with Netanyahu led to many juicy



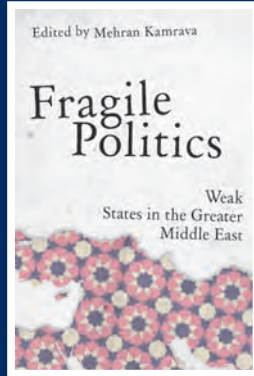
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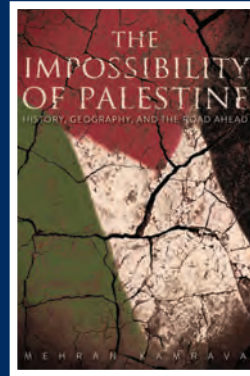
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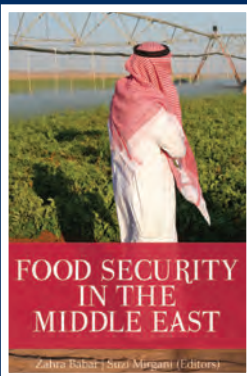
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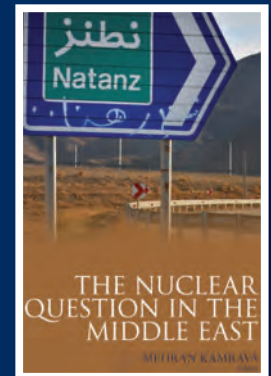
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newspaper and magazine stories, it had little effect on Israel's internal politics, since most Israelis also distrusted the U.S. president, and still do; a global poll released in December 2015 found that Obama had a lower favorability rating in Israel than almost anywhere else, with only Russians, Palestinians, and Pakistanis expressing greater disapproval.

Any remaining pressure on Netanyahu to pursue peace with the Palestinians evaporated soon after the Arab Spring erupted. Hosni Mubarak's regime in Egypt collapsed, threatening a cornerstone of Israel's security strategy; Syria sank into a bloody civil war; and a terrifying new nemesis, the Islamic State (also known as ISIS), appeared on the scene. These events unexpectedly bolstered Israel's position in several ways: Russia and the United States ultimately joined forces to eliminate most of Syria's chemical weapons, and the conservative governments of Jordan, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and (after the 2013 counterrevolution) Egypt strengthened their ties with Jerusalem (albeit unofficially in most cases). But the regional carnage and turmoil horrified Israeli voters, who told themselves: if this is what the Arabs are capable of doing to one another, imagine what they would do to us if we gave them the chance.

Nonetheless, peace and security played an uncharacteristically minor role in the next election, in January 2013. Instead, the race was dominated by social issues, including the rapidly rising costs of housing and food staples in Israel. Such concerns helped usher in a new class of freshman politicians, who replaced old-timers such as Barak. But none of them was able to overcome

the incumbent's experience and savvy, and after reengaging with his right-wing base and merging with another conservative party led by former Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman, Netanyahu won the election.

In the summer of 2014, following one last push for peace with Abbas (this time led by U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry), war broke out between Israel and Hamas. The discovery of dozens of tunnels dug by Hamas into Egyptian and Israeli territory put another big scare into the Israeli public and prompted a prolonged ground operation—the bloodiest conflict of the Netanyahu era. During 50 days of fighting, more than 2,000 Palestinians and 72 Israelis, mostly soldiers, were killed. Israel's Jewish population overwhelmingly supported the war, but the fighting caused communal tensions in the country to explode. Thousands of Arab Israelis—who identified with the suffering in Gaza and were tired of their own abuse by the police and their increasing marginalization under Netanyahu—protested against the war. Hundreds were arrested, and other Arabs employed in the public sector were reportedly threatened with firing after criticizing the conflict on Facebook.

## **THE NEW RIGHT**

Around the same time, personal animosities within Netanyahu's coalition started to pull it apart. Netanyahu was unable to prevent Israel's parliament, the Knesset, from electing Reuven Rivlin, a longtime Likud rival, to the largely symbolic presidency. And several of the prime minister's erstwhile allies, including Lieberman, endorsed a bill that would have forced *Israel Hayom*

to start charging its readers. (The bill never made it past a preliminary hearing.) In December, the government finally collapsed, and the Knesset called an early election.

Likud went into the 2015 race trailing in the polls. The public was angry with Netanyahu over a small-time financial scandal involving his wife and over the stalemated result of the war with Hamas. The Zionist Union, a new centrist coalition led by Labor's Isaac Herzog, seemed poised to form the next government. But the uncharismatic Labor leader proved no match for his wilier, more experienced adversary. Netanyahu tacked right—scoring an unprecedented invitation to address the U.S. Congress (which he used to denounce the nuclear deal the Obama administration was negotiating with Iran) and stealing votes from smaller conservative parties by promising not to allow a Palestinian state to be established on his watch. Then, on election day, he released a video in which he claimed that “Arab voters are heading to the polling stations in droves. Left-wing NGOs are bringing them in buses.” The statement wasn't true, but it effectively tapped into Jewish voters' anxiety and racism and won Likud the election: Likud emerged with 30 seats; the Zionist Union earned 24.

In Israel's fractious parliamentary system, votes alone don't determine who takes power, however; that gets decided during the coalition-building process that inevitably follows each election. In this case, the electoral math left Netanyahu, who was 31 seats short of a majority, with two choices: he could form a national unity coalition with Herzog and the ultra-Orthodox, or he could forge a narrow but ideologically

cohesive alliance with several smaller center- and far-right parties.

Choosing Herzog would have created a wider coalition and allowed Netanyahu to show a more moderate face to the world. But the prime minister, who was sick of acting like a centrist, picked the latter course instead. That left him with a very narrow, one-seat majority in the Knesset. But it also gave him his first undiluted hard-right government since his 2009 comeback—one that would finally allow him to realize his long-deferred dream of remaking Israel's establishment.

Although Netanyahu is both secular and Ashkenazi, his new allies are mostly Mizrahim—long ostracized from Israel's centers of power, even though they represent a large segment of the Jewish population—and religious Zionists, who are known for their knitted yarmulkes, are fiercely committed to (and often live in) West Bank settlements, and have, in recent years, come to hold many prominent positions in the army, the security services, and the civil service.

These groups are most vocally represented by three members of the current government: Likud's Miri Regev, the minister of culture; Naftali Bennett, the minister of education and head of Habayit Hayehudi (Jewish Home), a religious Zionist party that he built out of the ashes of the old National Religious Party; and Ayelet Shaked, Bennett's longtime sidekick and now the minister of justice. Regev is Sephardic—her family came to Israel from Morocco—and a former brigadier general in the IDF, where she served as chief spokesperson during the Gaza pullout. Bennett, the son of American immigrants, served in the Israeli special forces and then made

a fortune as a high-tech entrepreneur. He is both a model product of the “start-up nation” and the epitome of the religious, fiercely nationalist, pro-settlement leader (although he himself lives comfortably within the Green Line). Shaked, meanwhile, was a computer engineer before joining politics; despite her membership in the Jewish Home, she is neither religious nor a settler. Both she and Bennett worked directly for Netanyahu in Likud a decade ago, when he was the opposition leader, but they broke with him over personal quarrels in 2008.

Like the prime minister, Regev, Bennett, and Shaked are skilled, media-savvy communicators. In keeping with Israeli tradition, all three have complicated, “frenemy” relationships with Netanyahu. Regev climbed the ranks of Likud without the prime minister’s sponsorship, and Netanyahu has never forgiven Bennett and Shaked for their betrayals; the two are never invited to join him at his residence or on his plane. Yet so far, they have not let their personal grievances block the pursuit of their shared interests. Netanyahu needs Bennett and Shaked to keep his coalition afloat, and he needs Regev to maintain his support among Sephardic Israelis, an important Likud constituency. And there are no real ideological differences among the four politicians. Netanyahu is thus happy to let the others lead the charge against the old guard—and to take the heat for it as well.

Since taking office last year, the three ministers have readily obliged him. Regev—who likes to rail against what she calls “the haughty left-wing Ashkenazi elite” and once proudly told an interviewer that she’d never read

Chekhov and didn’t like classical music—has sought to give greater prominence to Sephardic culture and to deprive “less than patriotic” artists of government subsidies. Bennett’s ministry has rewritten public school curricula to emphasize the country’s Jewish character; it recently introduced a new high school civics textbook that depicts Israel’s military history through a religious Zionist lens and sidelines the role of its Arab minority. In December 2015, Bennett even banned *Borderlife*, a novel describing a romance between a young Jewish Israeli woman and a Palestinian man, from high school reading lists.

Shaked, for her part, has vowed to reduce judicial interference in the work of the executive and the Knesset by appointing more conservative justices to the Supreme Court next year, when four to five seats (out of 15) will open up. She has also made good use of her position as head of the cabinet committee on legislation, which decides which bills the executive will support in the Knesset. The committee has recently promoted several draft laws designed to curb political expression. One, aimed at non-Zionist Arab legislators, would allow the Knesset to suspend a member indefinitely for supporting terrorism, rejecting Israel’s status as a Jewish state, or inciting racism. Another, which Shaked has personally championed, would shame human rights groups by publicly identifying those that get more than half their funding from foreign governments. (So far, none of these bills, or even more restrictive measures put forward by Likud backbenchers—such as one that would label left-wing nongovernmental organizations “foreign agents” and another that would triple the jail sentence for flag burning—has been passed.)

Meanwhile, Netanyahu is doing his part as well. After last year's election, he insisted on holding on to the communications portfolio himself, giving him the last word on any media-related legislation. This move has given him unprecedented leverage over Israel's television and telecommunications networks, which have grown leery of doing anything to alienate the prime minister.

Many of the government's recent actions, such as Regev's promotion of Sephardic culture, seem designed to address the traditional disenfranchisement of Israel's Mizrahim and citizens living in the country's "periphery" (that is, far from the central Tel Aviv–Jerusalem corridor). Other measures are aimed at promoting social mobility. Yet virtually all of them have had a clear political goal as well: to reduce, if not eliminate, the domestic opposition to Israel's occupation of the West Bank, which Netanyahu and his allies want to make permanent. By portraying the shrinking peace camp and its supporters as unpatriotic stooges of foreign anti-Semites, the government hopes to delegitimize them and build a consensus around its hard-right policies.

The strategy seems to be working. One example: in a poll conducted last December of Israeli Jews, 53 percent of those surveyed supported outlawing Breaking the Silence, a veterans' group that aims to expose the harsh realities of the occupation by publishing wrenching testimonials of soldiers who have served in the West Bank.

### **DAGGERS DRAWN**

Late last summer, after years of relative quiet, violence erupted in the West

Bank and inside Israel. The first intifada (1987–93) was characterized by mass protests and stone throwing; during the second intifada (2000–2005), organized Palestinian suicide bombings and large-scale military reprisals by Israel caused thousands of casualties. This time, the so-called loners' intifada has taken a more privatized form. Acting on their own, young Palestinian men and women have used knives and homemade guns to attack Israeli military and police checkpoints or civilians at flash points such as the settlements and Jerusalem's Old City. So far, 34 Israelis have died in these assaults. Almost all the perpetrators have been arrested or shot on the spot—to date, about 200 Palestinians have been killed—but more have kept coming.

The loners' intifada has presented the current government with its toughest test so far. Netanyahu has always claimed to be tough on terror and has portrayed his opponents as softies. Yet he and his top aides have seemed clueless in the face of the rising violence. Instead of stanching the bloodshed, they have redoubled their attacks on those they deem enemies within: human rights groups and Arab Israeli politicians. And the center-left parties, worried about looking unpatriotic, have gone along with him. In April, Herzog urged Labor to "stop giving the impression that we are always Arab-lovers." And Yair Lapid, the head of the opposition Yesh Atid (There's a Future) party—another centrist faction—has called on the army and the police to ease their rules of engagement and "shoot to kill whoever takes out a knife or a screwdriver or whatever." Highlighting the danger of such rhetoric, in late March, B'Tselem, a respected human rights group,

released a video taken in Hebron showing an Israeli soldier executing a Palestinian suspect who had already been shot and was lying, bleeding, on the street.

Instead of remorse, the Hebron shooting unleashed a wave of ugly nationalism among many Israeli Jews. The military high command quickly detained the soldier and declared his action immoral, unlawful, and undisciplined. Yet in a public opinion poll conducted several days after the incident, 68 percent of respondents supported the shooting, and 57 percent said that the soldier should not face criminal prosecution. Far-right politicians, including Bennett, defended the killer, and Netanyahu, who had initially supported the military brass, quickly closed ranks with his right-wing rivals and called the shooter's parents to express his support. When Moshe Yaalon, the defense minister, nonetheless insisted on a criminal investigation, he was roundly attacked on social media for his stand. After Netanyahu seemed to side with Yaalon's critics, their quarrel escalated, and in May, Yaalon resigned. Announcing his decision, Yaalon remarked, "I fought with all my might against manifestations of extremism, violence, and racism in Israeli society, which are threatening its sturdiness and also trickling into the IDF, hurting it."

That Yaalon of all people could be subjected to such treatment shows just how much Israel has changed in recent years. A Likud leader and former IDF chief of staff, Yaalon is no leftist: he supported Oslo but later changed his mind when, as the head of military intelligence, he witnessed Arafat's duplicity firsthand. Yet Yaalon believes

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in the importance of a secular state and the rule of law. That marked him as one of the last of the Ben-Gurion-style old guard still in office. And those credentials were enough to incite the online mob. It didn't matter that he had an impressive military record, opposed the peace process, or supported settlement expansion. In Netanyahu's Israel, merely insisting on due process for a well-documented crime is now enough to win you the enmity of the new elite and its backers.

### **THE PERMANENT PRIME MINISTER**

One of the ways Netanyahu has retained power for so long—he's now Israel's second-longest-serving leader, after Ben-Gurion—has been by tailoring his politics to match public opinion. In 2009, he leaned toward the center because he feared Obama and wanted to dispel his own reputation for recklessness. In recent years, as the Israeli public has shifted rightward, so has he—which has allowed him to more openly indulge his true passions.

Throughout this period, Netanyahu has benefited from one other key asset: the lack of any serious challenger, either inside or outside Likud. Since returning to power in 2009, he has consistently beaten all other plausible candidates for prime minister in public opinion polls—by large margins. Within Likud, Netanyahu has managed to sideline a series of aspirants, such as Moshe Kahlon, Gideon Saar, and Silvan Shalom. And the opposition has failed to produce a credible alternative of its own. After leaving office in 2001, Barak undermined his standing by adopting a lavish lifestyle deemed unseemly for a Labor leader. Meanwhile, Tzipi Livni,

Olmert's foreign minister and his successor as the head of Kadima, actually beat Netanyahu's Likud in the 2009 election, winning 28 seats to Likud's 27. But she was unable to build a large enough coalition to form the next government, and her subsequent weakness as opposition leader damaged her popular appeal.

Bennett is now trying to position himself as a younger and more populist version of his one-time mentor. There's no doubt that Bennett is charismatic and has grown quite popular. But he leads a small party with a limited base that cannot win an election unless it unites with Likud. Nir Barkat, the right-wing mayor of Jerusalem, is another former high-tech entrepreneur who harbors national aspirations. But he lacks charisma and remains unknown to the public outside Israel's capital city.

Netanyahu's strongest current challenger is probably Lapid, the former columnist and TV anchor who established Yesh Atid as a centrist party in 2012 and won a spectacular victory in 2013, earning Yesh Atid the second-highest number of seats in the Knesset. Lapid joined Netanyahu's cabinet after he and Bennett forced the prime minister to drop the ultra-Orthodox parties. But Netanyahu soon outmaneuvered him, pushing Lapid to the Treasury—a well-established graveyard for ambitious politicians, since it often involves making unpopular moves such as raising taxes and cutting benefits. Lapid accomplished little while in office, and in 2015, after a tough fight with Herzog and his Zionist Union over the same voters, Yesh Atid lost almost half its seats. Since then, Lapid has improved his public standing—popularity polls now put Yesh Atid second, after

Likud—by appearing to be more religiously observant and by talking tough on terror. Lapid is a moderate (he supports a Palestinian state and opposes the expansion of remote West Bank settlements), is an excellent communicator, and is an astute reader of public sentiment. But he is hypersensitive—he tends to overreact when criticized—and he lacks security experience, a huge impediment in Israel.

None of this means that Netanyahu is invulnerable, however. In March, *Haaretz* published a poll showing that a new, imaginary centrist party led by Gabi Ashkenazi (a popular former IDF chief of staff), Kahlon, and Saar would beat Likud in an election held tomorrow. But unless its coalition crumbles, the government doesn't need to call a new election until November 2019, and the nonexistent party remains a fantasy. In the meantime, Netanyahu continues to maneuver. He has tried to entice the smaller right-wing parties into forming a new, broader party with Likud (so far, none of them has shown much interest). And this past spring, he held negotiations with Herzog over the formation of a unity coalition, only to back off at the last moment and offer his former ally Lieberman the post of defense minister. With Lieberman inside the government, the ruling coalition—more right-wing than ever—would get an expanded parliamentary base and more room to breathe.

Until the next election does come around, Netanyahu's government will keep trying to cement as many changes as possible to Israeli society and the Israeli establishment. The prime minister and his allies will push to appoint more conservatives to the

Supreme Court and more religious Zionists to key government and academic positions. They will maintain their support for Mizrahi culture and West Bank settlements, will impose more restrictions on left-wing organizations, and will work to increase tensions with Israel's Arabs.

Regardless of who wins the next election, at least some of these changes seem likely to become permanent. The country has already become far less tolerant and open to debate than it used to be. The peace camp has withered, and very few really challenge the status of the occupation anymore. Arab-Jewish relations are so bad that they would take outstanding leadership and enormous effort to fix. And the United States' retrenchment has strengthened the sense among many Israelis that they can go it alone and no longer need to worry about pleasing Washington. It's hard to see how a new Israeli prime minister—or a new U.S. president—will be able to reverse many of these shifts. 🌐

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# Israel Among the Nations

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## How to Make the Most of Uncertain Times

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*Robert M. Danin*

**I**n 1996, Ehud Barak, who was then Israel's foreign minister and would later serve as prime minister, characterized Israel as "a modern and prosperous villa in the middle of the jungle." Twenty years later, as political turmoil and violence engulf the Middle East, that harsh metaphor captures better than ever the way most Israelis see their country and its place in the region. Their standard of living has never been higher. Their country's economy is robust, and Israel's entrepreneurial spirit remains the envy of the world. In 2015, Israel ranked as the planet's fifth-happiest country on the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development's Better Life Index, topped only by Denmark, Finland, Iceland, and Switzerland. In its first half century of existence, Israeli soldiers fought a war virtually every decade against well-armed conventional Arab armies. Today, the threat of such a war has vastly diminished, and the Israeli military has never been stronger, both in absolute terms and relative to its neighbors.

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Now, however, it is Israeli civilians, not soldiers, who are the primary targets of Israel's enemies. They are vulnerable to rockets fired by Hamas from Gaza and by Hezbollah from Lebanon, which have killed over 100 Israelis since 2004. And in the past year, new forms of violence have emerged, as Palestinians have targeted Israelis in over 150 seemingly uncoordinated stabbings and more than 50 attacks in which drivers have intentionally rammed pedestrians with their cars. Israel's citizens feel more vulnerable in a personal sense, walking their streets, than they have since perhaps the 1948 War of Independence. Even during the second intifada, the Palestinian revolt that lasted from 2000 until 2005 and claimed the lives of more than 1,000 Israeli civilians, Jews believed they knew where it was safe to go and where it wasn't. That's not true today: in a recent poll conducted by the Israel Democracy Institute, nearly 70 percent of Israeli Jews surveyed said they greatly or moderately feared that they or people close to them would be harmed by the wave of violence that has swept the country since last October.

Meanwhile, chaos appears to loom across almost every border. A bloody and devastating civil war rages in Syria, where the regime of Bashar al-Assad and the jihadists of the Islamic State (also known as ISIS) seem intent on outdoing each other in brutality. Neighboring Jordan has long served as a buffer of sorts to Israel's east, but it is now struggling under the burden of hosting more than a million Syrian refugees. And ISIS and other jihadist organizations roam the virtual no man's land of the Sinai Peninsula, which the



somewhat wobbly Egyptian government has struggled to secure.

Confronted with threats at home and disorder all around, many Israelis have come to feel that the idealistic aspirations of earlier eras—all those dreams of peaceful coexistence with the Palestinians and with the greater Arab world—were naive at best and profoundly misplaced at worst. A sense of bitterness, resignation, and hopelessness now prevails. Many Israeli politicians seem to see greater advantage in stoking, rather than countering, such sentiments. For example, rather than point to the benefits that peace agreements and negotiated territorial concessions have produced, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu emphasizes how other territorial withdrawals—ones that were unilateral and unaccompanied by peace agreements—have resulted in further attacks against Israel.

Yet inside Israel's defense establishment, headquartered at the Kirya military complex in Tel Aviv, the picture is more nuanced. Israel's security chiefs share their compatriots' sense that the Middle East has become chaotic and that today's threats are more diffuse and inchoate than those Israel used to face. But these officials also recognize that their country is far from defenseless and that the threat of a conventional conflict has virtually disappeared. As the army's recently leaked National Intelligence Estimate for 2016 concluded, Israel faces no current threat of war and only a low probability of war in the coming year. In fact, the analysts who prepared the document argue that the turmoil sweeping the Middle East may even have improved Israel's strategic position.

The disconnect between public attitudes, political rhetoric, and military risk assessments reflects a kind of sensory overload. Israeli strategic planners can agree on a long list of threats and challenges but not on how to prioritize them. Like Israel's political leaders, they suffer from a deep sense of strategic confusion. So far, their response has been to hunker down and ride out the turbulence. That is a natural reaction. But it's also a risky one, which could lead Israel to forgo the kind of subtle, clever approaches it has adopted in the past when faced with complex threats. For all the danger Israel faces today, the current turmoil has also created real opportunities for Israel to improve its strategic position. But these will come to naught unless the government can see them clearly—and find the strength to take advantage of them.

#### **FRIENDS OLD AND NEW**

Although the chaos and violence currently tearing apart the Middle East is deeply unsettling, the changes that have swept the region in recent years have actually led to a closer alignment and stronger relations between Israel and its only official partners in the Arab world, Egypt and Jordan. The peace treaty that Egypt and Israel signed in 1979 removed Israel's single largest military threat and effectively ended the era of all-out war between the Arabs and the Israelis. It remains one of the most important contributors to Israel's security, since it ensures that the country will not be attacked by multiple armies on multiple fronts simultaneously, as it was in 1948, 1967, and 1973. Despite the tumult of the 2010–11 Arab uprisings, including an Egyptian revolution that

briefly brought the anti-Zionist Muslim Brotherhood to power, the peace treaty has proved durable and critical for both countries. Even the Islamist Egyptian president Mohamed Morsi acknowledged the treaty's importance and never sought to challenge or abrogate it. When the military deposed Morsi in July 2013, Egyptian-Israeli ties grew stronger than ever, with both sides firmly aligning against Hamas in Gaza, which is sandwiched between them. Egyptian and Israeli national security interests have converged to such a degree that in 2014, when Hamas rocket attacks provoked an intense 50-day Israeli military campaign in Gaza, Egypt clearly sided with Israel and even waved off U.S. efforts to bring an early halt to the fighting.

In the post-Arab Spring period, Israel has also drawn closer to Jordan, the country with which it shares its longest border. The open cooperation facilitated by the peace treaty that the two countries signed in 1994 has proved crucial to Israel's domestic and regional security interests. Jordan has played an instrumental role in helping defuse tensions at the Jerusalem holy site known to Muslims as Haram al-Sharif, or the Noble Sanctuary, and to Jews as the Temple Mount. Jordan is also helping absorb some spillover from the unrest roiling Iraq and Syria. Security cooperation between Israel and Jordan is flourishing, particularly since both share a common interest in securing Jordan's border with Syria and in countering Islamists across the region.

Farther afield, Israel has also made some new friends and strengthened ties with old ones. In a sense, it has developed a new version of the "periphery doctrine" that the country pursued in

the 1950s, when it established warm ties with important non-Arab states on the outer edges of the Middle East, such as Ethiopia, Iran, and Turkey. Since Israel's strategic relationship with Turkey broke down in 2010, Israel has forged new partnerships with Cyprus and Greece, both bitter foes of the Turkish government. Israel has also developed closer ties with a number of African countries, which has allowed it to increase its influence on the continent and to interdict arms flows to militants in the Sinai and Gaza. And India—which, as a leader of the Non-Aligned Movement, once kept Israel at arm's length—has developed extensive commercial, military, and diplomatic ties with the Jewish state in recent years.

Relations with Russia have also improved markedly: indeed, Netanyahu and Russian President Vladimir Putin clearly enjoy a better relationship with each other than either does with U.S. President Barack Obama. Washington and Moscow have argued viciously over the civil war in Syria; Israel, in contrast, appears to have established some clear rules of the road with Russia for operations there. According to press reports, Russia even temporarily transferred some military officers to Israel's military headquarters in Tel Aviv in order to improve coordination and prevent accidental clashes in the skies above Syria.

#### **UNCLEAR AND PRESENT DANGERS**

Despite such gains, Israel still faces many threats and potential dangers, and the country's leaders can't seem to agree on which are most pressing. President Reuven Rivlin, currently one of the country's most popular and widely respected officials, recently



*The Over-Promised Land: at the beach in Tel Aviv, December 2014*

suggested that ISIS might be the greatest present danger. Yet few in Israel's defense establishment—which comprises Israel's military, intelligence, and national security agencies—agree with that position. They largely see ISIS as an indirect problem, one that represents a bigger threat to regional stability and the viability of Israel's neighbors than it does to the country's own security.

The more direct and urgent danger, most believe, comes from Iran and its two main militant allies: Hamas and Hezbollah. Indeed, in January, then Defense Minister Moshe Yaalon declared that he would rather face ISIS in the Golan Heights than see Iranian troops or their proxies occupy that area. Israeli leaders see Iran as a rising revisionist power and have watched nervously as it has built significant influence, if not quite dominance, in Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, and Yemen.

Yet underneath this general consensus, Israeli leaders don't agree on the precise nature of the danger Iran represents. In recent years, Netanyahu has warned that Iran (or at least a nuclear-armed Iran) could constitute an "existential threat" to Israel. Yet that formulation has been vigorously disputed even by other security hawks, such as Barak—despite the fact that Barak reportedly advocated a military strike on Iran's nuclear facilities as recently as 2012. To them, a nuclear-armed Iran would represent an intolerable threat but not an existential one.

Netanyahu continues to object to the deal Iran struck last year with the United States and other major powers that requires Iran to significantly curtail its nuclear program in exchange for relief from international sanctions. Yet many of Israel's security professionals have adopted the view that the agreement, although flawed, has pushed the Islamic

Republic further away from acquiring a bomb—even further, perhaps, than an Israeli military strike would have. They believe that Tehran has significantly reduced its stockpile of enriched uranium and the number of centrifuges it operates and that Iran’s ability to produce plutonium has been eliminated, for the time being.

Still, virtually all Israeli officials view Iran as implacably hostile and expansionist. And Israel has taken it upon itself to act as the most stringent international monitor of Iran’s compliance with the nuclear agreement, vigilantly pointing out every infraction. But Israel is struggling to determine what, if anything, to do with the additional time—somewhere between five and 15 years—that the nuclear agreement with Iran has put on the clock.

### **YOU’LL NEVER WALK ALONE**

For many decades, Israel enjoyed a high degree of freedom when considering how to respond to the various threats it faced. David Ben-Gurion, the country’s founding father, pursued a delicate strategy of “nonidentification,” courting support from global powers but avoiding the constraints of formal alliances. Today, Israelis still ferociously cling to this idea of independence and to the need for the country to be able to “defend itself, by itself,” as the popular phrase goes.

Yet the reality has long since shifted. Like other medium-size powers, Israel cannot match every possible threat by itself. Most Israelis recognize that truth, and the state has grown increasingly dependent on its only reliable friend, the United States, with which it has developed a *de facto* strategic partnership over the last 30 years or so.

Israel’s lack of complete independence was demonstrated most dramatically during the standoff between Netanyahu and Obama over Iran. Israel had mobilized its formidable military and intelligence resources to prevent Iran from developing a nuclear breakout capacity. Even as the United States and other great powers initiated talks with Iran, Israel’s air force stepped up its training, and its officials began planning a preventive attack. But faced with stiff opposition from the Obama administration, Israel’s government ultimately stood down. Israel had been deterred—not by Tehran but by Washington.

Still, that episode has created little if any new distance between the two allies; on the contrary, the Israelis have sought to move even deeper into the American embrace. Despite the sour personal relations between Netanyahu and Obama, their two countries are now negotiating a new ten-year military assistance program that will replace and expand an expiring agreement that has ensured over \$3 billion in annual U.S. military assistance for the past decade. And it is almost certain that whoever moves into the White House next year will seek to improve U.S. relations with Netanyahu’s government.

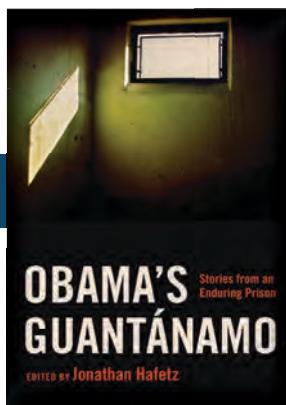
### **A FORMAL ALLIANCE**

Improving relations with Washington and perhaps changing the structure of the U.S.-Israeli relationship represent one of the best ways for Israel to take advantage of this uncertain moment—not by merely seeking a return to the state of affairs before Obama but by forging an even stronger bond with the United States. Israelis regularly refer to the Americans as allies. Yet the United

celebrate

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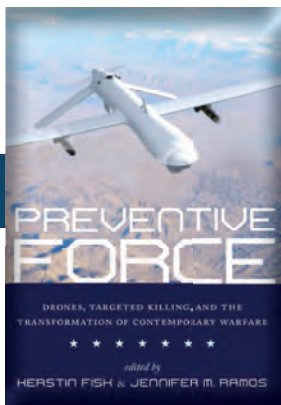
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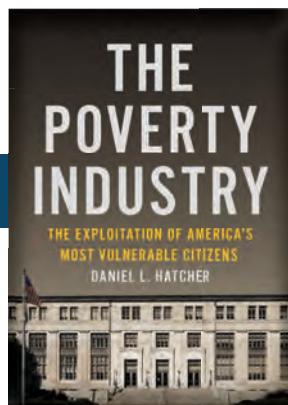
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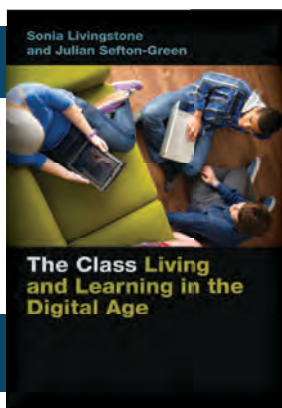
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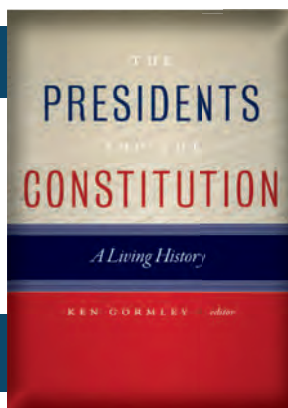
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## BE THE CHANGE.

States and Israel have no formal, treaty-based alliance. There have been times when Israel seriously contemplated pushing for such an arrangement. But in each instance, it decided against doing so, fearing that the price Washington would likely demand—territorial concessions to the Arabs—would prove too high.

Today, Israel's ambivalence stems from different factors. First, the Israelis fear that an alliance with the United States would force them to relinquish even more of their military independence, potentially preventing them from conducting certain military actions, ones along the lines of the 2007 Israeli air strike against an incipient Syrian nuclear facility, which the Israelis undertook after extensive consultations with the United States but without American participation. An alliance would also challenge the idea of Israeli self-reliance, which is central to the country's defining ethos.

But as the dispute over Iran's nuclear program showed, when push comes to shove, Israel is already willing to constrain itself and accept a high level of dependence in order to protect its close relationship with the United States. And other U.S. allies, such as Turkey, have initiated military actions when they believed their national interests were threatened, regardless of Washington's views. A formal U.S.-Israeli alliance, therefore, would not necessarily have a significant practical effect on Israeli freedom of maneuver. Israel's other major reservation regarding an alliance stems from a belief that the United States backs Israel partly because the Americans know that the Israelis will never ask U.S. soldiers to fight on Israel's behalf. But a formal alliance

would still allow Israel to maintain its commitment to not ask for American boots on the ground.

An alliance would offer significant benefits to Israel. First and foremost, it would provide an ironclad security guarantee: any attack on Israel would be met and rebuffed by the United States. During the Iran imbroglio, Obama repeatedly pledged that the United States "will always have Israel's back." But he never specifically, publicly promised to protect Israel against an Iranian attack. A treaty with Washington would ensure a lasting commitment of exactly that kind.

A formal alliance would also allow the Israelis to stop worrying, as they frequently do, about the contingent nature of their partnership with the United States. How much longer, they wonder, can Jerusalem safely rely on Washington to maintain their informal, quasi alliance? Many Israelis worry that the two countries will drift further apart as each undergoes demographic, political, and social changes. This may be happening already. A poll recently conducted by the Pew Research Center indicated that each U.S. generation is less sympathetic toward Israel than its predecessor. There is no guarantee that the strong pro-Israel consensus that has long been a bipartisan feature of U.S. politics will endure forever. Now is therefore the time for Israel to lock in the existing benefits of its relationship with Washington.

#### **TAKE THE INITIATIVE**

Closer to home, a second extremely important opportunity for Israel to consider involves its relationships with a number of Arab states that have historically wanted nothing to do with it. In

ways unforeseen and largely unintended, Obama may have made a greater contribution to improving these relationships than he ever thought possible. His efforts to pivot the United States away from the Middle East while negotiating with Iran highlighted a number of interests that Israel shares with the Sunni Arab countries—the very same states Israel battled ferociously during the first 50 years of its existence.

In the last decade, the centuries-old Sunni-Shiite divide has grown into a chasm, fueled by—and, in turn, fueling—the rivalry between the Sunni Arab powers and an Iranian-led Shiite bloc. The sectarian split has replaced the region's traditional fault line—the Arab-Israeli conflict—and has begun to reorder the Middle East in surprising ways. Israel and the Sunni Arab states now more clearly share a chief foe, in Iran, and a sense of concern over U.S. retrenchment.

Israel should leverage this change to shape a better future for itself among its neighbors. Some Israelis worry that the Sunni Arab states may be too unstable or unreliable to act as partners. But Israel should seize on their sense of weakness and their openness to explore a formal peace initiative.

In September 1967, following the Arabs' devastating defeat in the Six-Day War—during which Israel captured all of Jerusalem and the west bank of the Jordan River—the Arab League convened in Khartoum, Sudan, and issued its now-infamous declaration of what came to be known as “the three no's”: no peace with Israel, no recognition of Israel, and no negotiations with Israel. Israel responded by casting itself as the reasonable party, willing

to trade territory for peace, and took every opportunity to portray the Arabs as inexorably hostile and belligerent.

But the Arab wall of rejection cracked a decade later, when Egyptian President Anwar al-Sadat traveled to Jerusalem and made peace. And the wall arguably crumbled altogether in 2002, when the Arab League collectively endorsed a proposal put forward by Saudi Crown Prince Abdullah (who was king from 2005 until his death last year) that offered Israel the prospect of peace, security, and normal relations in exchange for a complete Israeli withdrawal to the pre-1967 borders, a move the Arab states see as the only way to begin resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

The Israelis had ample cause for skepticism. First, the timing was poor. One day prior to the Arab League's endorsement of the plan, Israel suffered a massive terrorist attack in which 30 Israelis in the coastal city of Netanya were killed at a Passover Seder; the bloodshed left the country in no mood to negotiate with its enemies. More substantively, the Israelis doubted that the Arabs could ever be flexible enough on their demand for a “right of return” for Palestinian refugees. And the Israelis also believed that the Arabs were only pretending to reach out to them in order to curry favor with Washington so as to gain leverage in the run-up to an anticipated U.S. invasion of Iraq, which the Arab states opposed.

But the Arab Peace Initiative has proved to be more than a tactical ploy: for the past 14 years, the Arab League has stood by it, even in the face of intense public anger in the Arab and wider Muslim world over Israel's



military actions in Lebanon and Gaza. On the “right of return,” the Arabs have called for “a just and agreed solution,” suggesting there may be some room for flexibility. And in 2013, the league even made modifications to the plan to make it more attractive to Israel: for example, the proposal now incorporates the notion of negotiated land swaps between Israel and the Palestinians, which shows that it is not a take-it-or-leave-it proposal. Emissaries from Egypt and Jordan have traveled to Israel on behalf of the Arab League to allay Israeli apprehensions. Prince Turki al-Faisal, a former head of Saudi intelligence and former ambassador to the United States, has met publicly with prominent Israelis and reached out to the Israeli public through interviews with various Israeli media outlets. Throughout, however, Turki has made it clear that there can be no progress in broader Arab-Israeli relations without addressing the Palestinian issue.

The Israeli government has yet to offer an official response to the plan, and Israel’s leaders have essentially ignored it. There have been a few exceptions: Dan Meridor, a former Likud deputy prime minister, and Yair Lapid, who leads the center-right party Yesh Atid, have both supported the idea of considering the Arab initiative under certain conditions. And a number of former chiefs of the Mossad, the Israeli foreign intelligence service, including Danny Yatom and Meir Dagan, have decried Israel’s lack of a positive response. But for the most part, the Arab plan has been met with Israeli silence. After decades of bemoaning Arab rejectionism, Israel now finds itself branded the rejectionist party itself—by the Arabs.

The staunchest Israeli critics of the Arab Peace Initiative argue that given

the chaos and instability plaguing the region, it’s not even clear how long the current Sunni Arab governments will stay in power: Why negotiate with them when they are so weak? Critics also point out that the Palestinians seem unwilling or unable to conclude a deal—so why give them a veto over Israel’s regional relations? The answer is that talking with the Arabs might have strategic benefits even if it fails to unlock the stalemate with the Palestinians. Better contacts between Israel and the Sunni Arab states, particularly Saudi Arabia, could help forge a more united front against Iran. Israel could test the Arab plan’s sincerity and in doing so open up a channel to the broader Arab world by expressing a desire to negotiate with Saudi Arabia and other Arab League states, while maintaining certain Israeli reservations about some of the plan’s elements. As one senior Israeli official recently told me, “Never before have we been offered so much while being asked for so little in return.”

### **NOTHING VENTURED . . .**

If Israel prefers not to deal with the Arab Peace Initiative, then it should consider offering up its own regional peace initiative, which Netanyahu has declined to do. Many Israelis, even within the prime minister’s camp, have been frustrated by their leader’s passivity on this front. Indeed, Netanyahu’s tenure has been defined not by right-wing extremism, as many of Israel’s detractors claim, but by risk aversion. In his more than seven years in power, Netanyahu has neglected to articulate a vision—much less offer a clear plan—for how Israel could achieve peace and consolidate its security and economic gains. Given the narrow right-

wing base on which his government rests, Netanyahu is understandably reluctant to hint at the types of concessions he would be prepared to make for peace. But in adopting a wait-and-see attitude toward the political changes that are roiling the Middle East, Israel is forfeiting a chance to help set the international agenda in a way that would be favorable to it.

Every previous Israeli prime minister has recognized that when it comes to statecraft, Israel can play either offense (initiating peace negotiations on its own terms) or defense (resisting attempts by its friends and adversaries alike to force it to the table on terms Israel dislikes). Offense—taking the battle to its adversaries—is far more consonant with the traditional Israeli political ethos. Israel would gain considerable support from its friends and allies by outlining a vision for peace and an approach toward realizing it. And the country will continue to pay a price if it fails to do so.

Israelis rightly point out that their conflict with the Arabs no longer defines the region's politics. But that condition will not last forever: an almost inevitable future outbreak of violence in Gaza, the West Bank, or Lebanon will surely return the world's attention to Israel, and the major powers will once again call on it to try to make concessions. What is more, while Israel sits on its hands, the other parties to the conflict are pushing forward with their own agendas. Israel's friends, including the United States, are weighing plans to propose new peace efforts before the end of this year. Meanwhile, Palestinian officials are seeking new ways to confront or isolate Israel, by gaining ever more official recognition at the UN and by

mobilizing international boycotts of Israeli goods and scholarship.

By outlining a plan for peace now, precisely when the Middle East is experiencing unrest and turmoil, Israel has an opportunity to explore the possibility of new relationships in its neighborhood and better ones in the rest of the world. Israel ought to apply to its foreign relations the same innovative, entrepreneurial spirit that has allowed the country to thrive in the technological and military realms. Laying out a vision would not imply a naive denial of harsh realities. Instead, Israel would improve its standing by deciding, after many years of inaction, to simply try. 🌍

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## Israel's Second-Class Citizens

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### Arabs in Israel and the Struggle for Equal Rights

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*As'ad Ghanem*

**W**hen the world focuses on the Arab-Israeli crisis today, the plight of the 4.6 million Palestinians living in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank gets most of the attention. But another pressing question haunts Israeli politics: the status and future of Israel's own Arab citizens, who number around 1.7 million and make up around 21 percent of its population. Over the past few decades, Arabs in Israel have steadily improved their economic lot and strengthened their civil society, securing a prominent place in the country's politics in the process. But since 2009, when Benjamin Netanyahu began his second term as prime minister, they have also seen their rights erode, as the government has taken a number of steps to disenfranchise them. Israeli policymakers have long defined their state as both Jewish and democratic, but these recent actions have shown that the government now emphasizes the former at the expense of the latter.

This onslaught has triggered a debate among the leaders of the Arab community in Israel over how to respond. One camp wants Arab citizens to deepen their integration into mainstream society and

join forces with the Israeli left to push for equality on the national stage. The other urges Arabs to withdraw from national politics altogether, creating autonomous cultural, educational, and political institutions instead. At the moment, Arab political leaders seem to favor the former approach. But the best strategy would be for Arabs to synthesize these competing visions into a unified program: one that calls on the Israeli government to integrate Israel's Arab citizens into existing political structures even as it demands greater autonomy in such areas as educational and cultural policy. The goal would be a system that grants Jews and Arabs equality in shared institutions and protects the rights of both to shape their own communities.

#### **LEFT OUT AND MOVING UP**

Israel's Arab citizens are the descendants of the approximately 150,000 Palestinians who stayed in the country following the expulsion of the majority of their brethren around the time of Israel's establishment in 1948. Over the two decades that followed, Israel's remaining Arabs suffered from high rates of poverty and low standards of living, had few opportunities for education, and were governed by martial law, which imposed various restrictions on them, from limitations on domestic and international travel to constraints on setting up new businesses. To prevent the emergence of independent Arab centers of power, the Israeli government also closely supervised the activity of Arab municipal and religious institutions and arrested many Arab activists.

Since 1966, when martial law was lifted, the situation of Arab citizens has

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improved greatly. Consider education: in 1960, only 60 Arab students were enrolled in Israeli universities; today, there are more than 20,000 Arab university students in the country, two-thirds of whom are female, and around 10,000 Arab Israelis study abroad. Living standards have also risen, as has the status of women, and a strong middle class has emerged.

In 2014, the most recent year for which data are available, 66 of the 112 towns in Israel with more than 5,000 residents had virtually all-Arab populations. And thanks to high birthrates and a young population—half of Israel's Arab citizens are under the age of 20, whereas only 30 percent of Jewish Israelis are—the Arab Israeli population is likely to keep growing fast, with or without more support from the government. (Some Israeli officials have described the growing Arab population as a threat to the Jewish majority; in fact, since the Jewish population is also growing, it is likely that Arabs will continue to make up only around 20 percent of Israel's population over the next three decades.)

In short, Arabs in Israel are wealthier, healthier, and more numerous than ever before. Yet by most measures of well-being, they still lag behind their Jewish counterparts. In 2013, the most recent year for which data are available, the median annual income of Israel's Arab households was around \$27,000; for Jewish households, it was around \$47,000, nearly 75 percent higher. The infant mortality rate is more than twice as high among Arabs as it is among Jews. Arabs are also underrepresented in Israel's bureaucracy and academic institutions, making up less than two percent of the senior faculty in the country's universities.

And Arabs remain deeply segregated from Israel's Jewish population: 90 percent of Arabs live in almost exclusively Arab towns and villages, and with just a few exceptions, Arab and Jewish children attend separate schools. (Nevertheless, Arabs and Jews remain relatively open to integration: a 2015 survey by the Israeli sociologist Sammy Smooha found that more than half of Israel's Arabs and Jews supported the idea of Arabs living in Jewish-majority neighborhoods.)

What is more, when it comes to government support in such areas as the allocation of land for new construction, financing for cultural institutions, and educational funding, Arabs suffer from ongoing discrimination, despite some recent progress. Arabs make up around 21 percent of Israel's population, but according to the Mossawa Center, a nongovernmental organization that advocates for Israel's Arab citizens, Arab communities receive only seven percent of government funds for public transportation and only three percent of the Israeli Ministry of Culture and Sport's budget is allocated for Arab cultural institutions; Arab schools are also significantly underresourced. (Toward the end of 2015, the Israeli government approved a five-year economic development program for Israel's Arab community, worth up to \$4 billion, that will increase funding for housing, education, infrastructure, transportation, and women's employment. Although the plan represents a step in the right direction, the exact amount of funding that will be allocated to each of these areas remains unclear, as does the process by which its implementation will be monitored.) And then there is the fact that Israel defines itself along ethnonationalist

lines that exclude the Arab minority—from a national anthem that famously describes the yearning of a Jewish soul for a homeland in Zion to a flag that displays a Star of David. In these ways, the Israeli government has maintained the dominance of the Jewish majority and denied Arabs genuine equality.

Arabs in Israel thus confront a frustrating confluence of factors: on the one hand, they enjoy a rising socioeconomic position; on the other, they face a government that in many respects has prevented them from achieving true equality. How they respond to this frustrating dynamic, and how the Israeli government reacts, will have an enormous impact on the future of Israeli society, politics, and security.

### THE INTERNAL DIVIDE

Arabs in Israel are not politically monolithic, and their goals vary. Their civic organizations, political activists, and public intellectuals offer competing visions for both the community's internal development and its relationship with the state.

Broadly speaking, however, their agendas tend to fall into one of two frameworks, each based on a different understanding of Arab Israelis' split identity. The first—call it a “discourse of difference”—suggests that Arabs' ethnocultural identity, rather than their Israeli citizenship, should be the starting point of their demands for change. By this logic, the Israeli government should empower Arabs to autonomously govern their own communities, by, for example, encouraging Arab officials to reform the curricula of Arab schools. The second—a “discourse of recognition”—takes Israeli citizenship, rather than Arab identity, as its starting point. This framework suggests

that equality will be achieved when the state recognizes Arabs as equal Israeli citizens and equitably integrates them into existing institutions.

For now, the latter approach seems to be dominant among Arabs in Israel. But even across this divide, there are a number of areas of consensus. Arabs of all political tendencies tend to condemn the government's current policies as segregationist and discriminatory; many also contend that the government's professed commitments to democracy and to the Jewish character of the state are irreconcilable. Nor are these the only points on which most Arabs agree: around 71 percent of Arabs in Israel support a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, according to a 2015 survey, and only 18 percent reject the coexistence of Arabs and Jews in Israel.

The various strains of Arab political thought were brought together in December 2006, when a group of Arab activists and intellectuals published a declaration, *The Future Vision of the Palestinian Arabs in Israel*, that sought to define Arabs' relationship with the state and their hopes for the country's future. The document, which I co-authored, called on the Israeli government to recognize its responsibility for the expulsion of Palestinians around the time of Israeli independence and to consider paying reparations to the descendants of the displaced; to grant Arab citizens greater autonomy in managing their cultural, religious, and educational affairs; to enshrine Arabs' rights to full equality; and, perhaps most striking, to legally define Israel as a homeland for both Arabs and Jews—a direct challenge to the historically Jewish character of the state.

Ratified by the National Committee for the Heads of the Arab Local Authorities in Israel (a body that represents all of Israel's Arabs), the document was embraced by the Arab public: a poll I conducted in 2008 with the sociologist Nohad Ali found that, despite their many differences, more than 80 percent of Arab Israelis supported its main proposals. In the years since its release, politicians representing some of Israel's major Arab political parties have repeatedly called on the government to act on its demands. But Jewish leaders in the Israeli government, media, and academia have largely opposed the document. The board of the Israel Democracy Institute, a think tank, produced a statement in January 2007 arguing that the *Future Vision* report, as well as two other documents released by Arab activists in 2006, "den[ie]d the very nature of Israel as a Jewish and democratic state" and declaring that the institute "reject[ed] this denial and its implication that there is an inescapable contradiction between the state's Jewish and democratic nature."

### **PARLIAMENTARY PREJUDICE**

Arab-Jewish relations got even worse in the years after 2009, when Netanyahu returned to the premiership. Since then, the Israeli government has taken numerous steps to further hold back Arab citizens, from rules that limit the rights of Arabs to live in certain Jewish villages to a law that restricts the ability of Palestinians in the West Bank to obtain Israeli citizenship if they marry an Arab citizen of Israel. (Foreign Jews of any nationality, meanwhile, can become Israeli citizens without establishing family ties to Israelis.) In the Negev

desert, home to most of Israel's Bedouins, the government has introduced projects that aim to cement Jewish control of the land, by, for example, demolishing unrecognized Bedouin settlements and establishing planned Jewish towns in their place. More generally, the Netanyahu government has stepped up the official rhetoric affirming the need to strengthen the Jewish character of the state.

In March 2014, the Knesset passed a law raising the threshold for representation in the legislature from two percent to 3.25 percent of the popular vote. The move threatened to strip the four so-called Arab parties—Balad, Hadash, Ta'al, and the Islamic Movement in Israel's southern branch—of their seats in the election of 2015. It was a reminder that the Israeli government's anti-Arab policies derive as much from the calculation on the part of the Netanyahu government that weakening the political position of Arabs might keep left-wing parties from regaining power as from the prejudices of some Israeli officials.

Largely to prevent their exclusion from the Knesset, the Arab parties banded together in January 2015 to create the Joint List, a big-tent political party that ran on a single ticket in the election held that March. On election day, Netanyahu sought to boost Jewish turnout by making the racially charged claim that Arab voters were "streaming in droves to polling stations." The Joint List was remarkably successful nevertheless. Some 82 percent of Israel's Arab voters cast a ballot in support of it. With 13 seats, it emerged as the third-largest political party in the Knesset after Netanyahu's Likud Party and the center-left Zionist Union. Even more impressive, the Joint List managed to increase turnout among Arab voters by



*Speaking up: the Joint List leader Ayman Odeh at a protest in Tel Aviv, October 2015*

seven percentage points, from 56.5 percent in the 2013 election to 63.5 percent in 2015. This surge suggests that Arabs in Israel have become more confident that their elected representatives can overcome their differences and act as an effective united force in the Israeli establishment—in short, that national politics offer a path toward change. At least when it comes to parliamentary representation, right-wing efforts to impede the progress of the country's Arabs have not succeeded.

Rather than accept this show of strength, Netanyahu's coalition responded with further measures meant to weaken Arabs' political position. In November 2015, his government outlawed the northern branch of the Islamic Movement, an Islamist organization that has rallied a substantial portion of the Arab community around opposition to what it describes as

Jewish threats to Muslim holy sites in Jerusalem. And in February of this year, after three Arab parliamentarians visited the families of Palestinians who were killed after attacking Israelis, Jewish lawmakers introduced a so-called suspension bill that would allow a three-fourths majority of the Knesset to eject any representative deemed to have denied the Jewish character of the state or incited violence. The Arab population views the proposed law as a direct attempt to sideline their representatives on the national stage. "Despite the delegitimization campaign against us and the raising of the electoral threshold, we decided to remain part of Israeli politics," Ayman Odeh, an Arab parliamentarian who heads the Joint List, said during a debate on the proposed rule in the Knesset in February. "Yet we continue to be harassed."

### **CITIZENS, UNITED**

These developments have intensified the search for a new approach among Arab elites. Two main alternatives have emerged. The first, headed by Odeh, argues that Arab Israelis should work with the Israeli left to unseat the Netanyahu government and replace it with a center-left coalition that is willing to resume the peace talks with the Palestinians and consider major steps to advance the equality and integration of Arab citizens. The second, led by the northern branch of the Islamic Movement, as well as those Knesset members on the Joint List who represent Balad, opposes forming a coalition with the Israeli left. Both camps support the creation of a separate political body to represent Arab citizens, but whereas the former believes that such a body should supplement Arab voters' current representation in the Knesset, the latter believes it should replace it.

These competing platforms have split the Arab public. In the 2015 survey conducted by the sociologist Smootha, 76 percent of Arab Israelis polled supported the Joint List's cooperation with Jewish parties in the Knesset. But 33 percent of Arab respondents voiced support for a boycott of Knesset elections; 19 percent supported the use of any means, including violence, to secure equal rights; and 54 percent said that a domestic intifada would be justified if the situation of Arabs does not substantially improve.

The future of the Arabs in Israel depends in part on their ability to overcome these internal divisions, which have hindered the ability of the Arab leadership to achieve progress. Disagreement among Arab leaders as to whether

a directly elected Arab political institution should replace or supplement Arabs' representation in the Knesset, for example, has so far left the Arab population without an elected body of its own. In fact, it should be possible to synthesize these competing visions into a unified program that pushes for equal representation in existing institutions and greater autonomy when it comes to educational and cultural policy. No matter what shape such a platform takes, however, it should commit Arab activists to nonviolence, and it should clearly demand that the Israeli government abolish discrimination in the allocation of state resources. Finally, since broad support for Arabs' demands for change will make them more effective, Arabs should invite Jews in Israel, Jewish organizations outside the country, Arabs and Palestinians in the region, and others in the international community that are sympathetic to their cause to endorse the platform.

But in many ways, the future of the Arabs in Israel hinges on developments over which they have little control. The first is how the Netanyahu government and its successors manage Israel's conflict with the Palestinians in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank: whereas open violence between Israel and the Palestinians tends to exacerbate anti-Arab sentiment among Israel's Jewish majority, a solution to the conflict could set the stage for reconciliation among Arabs and Jews in Israel. The second, of course, is how the Israeli government treats its own Arab citizens. Regardless of the state's choices, however, Arabs in Israel can still shape their own fate—but that will require settling on a unified political program. 🌍



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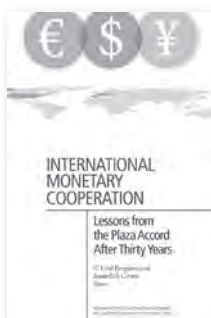
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# Israel's Evolving Military

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## The IDF Adapts to New Threats

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*Amos Harel*

Soon after Benjamin Netanyahu began his second term as Israel's prime minister in March 2009, he ordered the country's military to develop a plan for a unilateral military strike on Iran's nuclear facilities. The air force and the intelligence branch went to work immediately; according to Ehud Olmert, Netanyahu's predecessor, the preparations alone would ultimately cost the country nearly \$3 billion.

Israel never carried out the attack, of course, and in retrospect, Netanyahu and Ehud Barak, then Israel's defense minister, may never have seriously considered launching one. But U.S. President Barack Obama took the threat seriously enough to toughen sanctions against Iran in response. By bringing the Iranian economy to its knees, the sanctions paved the way for the election of President Hassan Rouhani, a relative moderate who pushed through the international agreement that has since put Iran's nuclear program on hold for the next decade.

Since then, Israel's security agencies have been able to refocus their attention

on all the other threats that gathered during the years they were preoccupied with Iran's nukes. In the last five years, states and borders have collapsed throughout the Middle East, militant groups such as the Islamic State (also known as ISIS) have conquered vast territories and drawn in large numbers of followers, and the schism between Shiites and Sunnis has turned more violent. All this turmoil has fundamentally transformed the dangers Israel now faces. The conventional threat once posed by the Syrian military has almost completely disappeared, only to be replaced by the appearance of more terrorists on another of Israel's borders.

At the same time, since October 2015, the conflict with the Palestinians has flared up, with teenagers from the West Bank carrying out "lone wolf" knife and gun attacks. The Israeli military's response to the violence has raised thorny questions about its code of conduct and laid bare the broader divisions—between right and left, and between religious and secular Jews—that are transforming the Israel Defense Forces and the country itself. At the same time that the IDF must confront external threats, then, Israel's internal problems are falling on its shoulders.

### UNSWORN ENEMIES?

Shortly before Gadi Eisenkot became the IDF's chief of staff in February 2015, he met with Dan Meridor, a former member of Netanyahu's security cabinet. "You're going to command an exceptional army," Meridor told me he told Eisenkot. "You only have one problem: there are no serious enemies left to fight." Meridor was exaggerating, but he had a point. Israel's traditional foes no longer pose the threat they once did.

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For most of the past few decades, the IDF's nightmare scenario was a repeat of the 1973 Yom Kippur War, when Syrian tanks stormed the Golan Heights and Syrian commandos captured Mount Hermon in a surprise attack. Today, after more than five years of civil war, Syria has disintegrated, and the risk of a conventional conflict with Israel has nearly vanished. In April, Israeli soldiers on Mount Hermon told me that their Syrian counterparts on the other side of the border, unable to obtain supplies, had deserted their positions more than a year earlier. Most of Syria's tank units and artillery batteries have disbanded, and much of the country's massive arsenal of chemical weapons, which Damascus began stockpiling in the 1970s to deter Israel, has been dismantled under international supervision.

As for the Arab countries still controlled by the authoritarian old guard, they have grown ever more interested in cooperating with Israel, albeit quietly. Egypt, Jordan, and, to a lesser extent, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates have abandoned their past fixation on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and have mostly recognized that the problems they share with Israel are bigger than those that divide them: Iran and its proxies, on the one hand, and ISIS and al Qaeda, on the other. As did Israeli leaders, Saudi officials criticized the Obama administration over the nuclear deal with Iran; in recent years, Saudi Arabia has also stepped up its intelligence sharing with Israel.

The disappearance of the conventional threats to Israel's security is not just the result of recent regional turmoil, however; it is also a product of these governments' recognition of Israel's

military superiority. When it comes to Israel's commanders, defense technologies, air force, and intelligence agencies, the country's capabilities are vastly superior to those of its neighbors. Its victories in most conflicts since 1948 have made this superiority abundantly clear. Partly as a result, since 1973, Syria has mostly avoided confronting Israel directly, and Egypt and Jordan have signed peace agreements with it.

### **DANGEROUS NEIGHBORS**

Yet considering the remaining threats to Israel's security—militant groups—the picture grows darker. At the moment, Hezbollah and ISIS are too busy fighting each other in Syria to think much about Israel. But both groups have declared their intention to attack it in the future. Once Syria's civil war finally ends, Hezbollah will probably need time to regroup and so will hold off on attacking Israel; ISIS will likely act on its threats sooner.

Over the last ten years, Hezbollah has amassed an arsenal of between 100,000 and 150,000 rockets and missiles. During the 2006 war in Lebanon, the group launched some 4,200 of such projectiles at Israeli towns and cities. Most of them missed, but they still killed 42 Israeli civilians and provoked a massive military response—a sign that Hezbollah had managed to exploit Israel's extreme sensitivity to casualties. Since then, the group's leaders have pledged to up the ante in any future conflict. Should Israel attack again, they say, they will turn Lebanese territory into a death trap for IDF forces; Israeli officials contend that Hezbollah would hit Israeli towns and infrastructure with as many as 1,500 rockets per day and launch cross-border raids on Israeli villages and military



*On guard: an Israeli soldier in northern Israel, April 2016*

installations. Using this combination of asymmetric tactics, Hezbollah believes that it will force Israel into a stalemate—an outcome Hezbollah could then present as a victory, given the IDF's enormous advantages.

At the beginning of this year, Hassan Nasrallah, Hezbollah's secretary-general, claimed that the group plans to supplement this approach with still new tactics. In the event of an Israeli attack, he promised, Hezbollah will strike Israeli nuclear sites and fire rockets at chemical storage tanks in Haifa, where much of Israel's heavy industry is located. (Nasrallah has also claimed that Hezbollah would invade the Galilee, the Israeli region closest to the Lebanese border.) Although Hezbollah may prove too weak to deliver on such threats in the face of an all-out Israeli invasion, the group clearly poses a more serious threat than it did a few years ago. Despite the heavy casualties

Hezbollah has sustained in Syria, its commanders will emerge from the conflict there with valuable combat experience that they could use against the IDF. After the Syrian civil war ends, Hezbollah and its Iranian patrons will no doubt still view Israel as the region's major source of evil. But because the group will likely be reeling from that bloody conflict, it will probably not attack immediately; rather, it will wait months or even years for the right moment to strike.

Should Hezbollah unleash its promised barrage of rocket attacks on Israel, the mayhem would bring civilian life there to a virtual halt, putting the government under enormous public pressure to stop the attacks. To do so, it would likely send tens of thousands of ground troops deep into Lebanon and carry out aggressive air strikes against Hezbollah's bases there. But since Hezbollah has

built its bases in densely populated areas, the IDF would likely kill many Lebanese civilians in the process. The Israeli government would thus find itself in a bind, facing intense domestic demands for rapid action on the one hand and international condemnation for its tactics on the other. To make matters worse, the IDF would be unlikely to achieve a decisive victory: even under a heavy offensive, Hezbollah would still be able to fire a large number of rockets at Israel.

Israel's current military leaders recognize this dilemma, but they also contend that against massive rocket fire, there would probably be no alternative to an IDF ground maneuver in Lebanon. The goal of inflicting massive military destruction on Lebanon would be to deter Hezbollah from attacking for at least a decade after the end of a potential conflict.

As for ISIS, it represents a significant threat to Israel, but it is not as dangerous as Hezbollah. ISIS has already sent some of its foreign fighters home to Europe to attack Jewish targets there and has repeatedly threatened to attack Israel from both the Egyptian and the Syrian border. It will likely try to do so soon, since doing so would give it a massive PR boost. To prepare for that possibility, the IDF has deployed more forces to both borders and strengthened its fences there; it has also stepped up intelligence gathering on the group.

The Palestinian territories, meanwhile, present their own set of problems. Since at least 2007, when Hamas took over Gaza by force the year after it won elections there, the IDF has worked closely with the Palestinian Authority, which still governs the West Bank, to

counter the group. In return for the PA's cooperation, the Israeli government has generally not intervened in the PA's domestic affairs and has allowed the West Bank to enjoy a modest economic recovery. At the same time, more and more Israeli leaders have abandoned talk of a permanent peace and have started focusing on how to manage, rather than resolve, the conflict.

Yet Israel's strategy has recently run into serious problems. During Israel's 2014 military campaign against Hamas, the IDF aggressively bombed Gaza in order to stop the group's rocket fire and destroy the tunnels it had dug under the border. Israel even sent in ground troops to kill Hamas' fighters and attack its military infrastructure near the border with Israel. The death toll—1,483 Palestinian civilians, 722 Palestinian fighters, and 72 Israelis, 66 of them soldiers, were killed, according to the UN—led to intense Western criticism of Israel's tactics as unnecessarily brutal.

In Gaza, the IDF faces the same dilemma as in Lebanon: stopping enemy attacks seems to require Israeli offensives that kill many civilians. Worse, it appears that another conflict with Hamas may be in the offing. Lacking the support from Egypt it once enjoyed and facing public discontent as everyday life in Gaza becomes increasingly miserable, the militant group is feeling pressured, which might encourage it to begin another round of escalation with Israel.

## **ARMY AND NATION**

Not only has Israel's military had to contend with shifting external threats; it has also had to grapple with changes in its own society. Until at least the mid-1980s, Israel saw itself as struggling

for survival. Most Israeli men considered combat service a national necessity and a personal aspiration, and most women were content to serve in the IDF in noncombat support roles. For the first few decades after the Holocaust, most Israelis thought that spending time in uniform and suffering military casualties were a worthwhile price to pay for protecting the country.

Since the 1980s, however, that sentiment has diminished somewhat. Many Israelis began to disapprove of the occupation of the Gaza Strip and the West Bank and to question their country's actions in the 1982 war with Lebanon and in the first intifada, which began in 1987. Then, in the early 1990s, came the Oslo Accords, which were designed to settle the Israeli-Palestinian conflict once and for all; at the same time, Israel deepened its security, economic, and cultural ties to the United States and some western European countries. Many Israelis became convinced that their country might finally break the pattern of seemingly endless conflict. That daydream was shattered by the assassination of Yitzhak Rabin, Israel's then prime minister, in 1995, and by the second intifada, which lasted from 2000 to 2005. Yet many Israelis retained their skepticism over the value of their country's military actions. Israel has now become the kind of society that the military strategist Edward Luttwak might call "post-heroic"—one that is less willing to risk the lives of its young people in wars that segments of the population do not consider absolutely necessary. Some Israelis have also become less comfortable with enemy civilian deaths, in part out of concern for their country's international reputation.

At the same time, the military's demographic makeup has started to change. Today, only 73 percent of eligible Jewish Israeli men and 58 percent of eligible Jewish Israeli women serve in the IDF—a historic low in a country with a long-standing policy of mandatory military service for most Jews. Many of the Jewish men who don't serve are ultra-Orthodox and non-Zionist; under a long-standing deal with the government, they are exempted from service so that they can continue their religious studies. Jewish women, meanwhile, can opt out of service simply by declaring themselves religious, even if they are Zionists and aren't ultra-Orthodox. Such exemptions frustrate much of the secular population, especially the parents of military-age Israelis, who feel that the rules place an undue burden on those willing to serve. Since 2014, the state has required several thousand highly religious yeshiva students to enlist each year, and the students have generally complied. But popular tension over the exemptions seems set to continue.

Another major change that has occurred in recent years is the increasing reluctance of liberal secular Jews to volunteer to serve as officers and in combat units. A growing number of mostly right-wing religious Zionists have stepped in to fill these gaps, coming to dominate the ranks of the IDF's elite combat groups. Between 1990 and 2010, the percentage of religious junior officers in infantry units rose from 2.5 percent to somewhere between 35 percent and 40 percent. This changing balance raises a number of potential problems. It is conceivable, for example, that units staffed by religious, right-wing Israelis might not obey an order to dismantle

Jewish settlements in the West Bank. The IDF dismantled such settlements during Israel's withdrawal from the Gaza Strip in 2005, and during that operation, some 60 Israeli soldiers refused to take orders from their superiors; a withdrawal from the West Bank, where there are far more settlers than there were in Gaza before 2005, could pose a greater challenge. Highly religious male soldiers may also have problems interacting with their female colleagues: some have already refused to serve in mixed combat units and have demanded that women soldiers dress in "modest" uniforms. In recent years, the extent of gender segregation within IDF units and the degree to which religious soldiers should be permitted to excuse themselves from cultural activities that they consider immoral have been issues of near-constant debate in Israel; the IDF appears to be leaning toward secular approaches to such issues and has faced growing criticism from rabbis and some members of the Knesset for doing so.

Israelis have also grown more critical of the IDF's performance, particularly in the conflict in Lebanon in 2006 and in its 2014 military campaign in Gaza; public opinion polls suggest that most Israelis believe their country ended both those conflicts in a draw. Many taxpayers now have a hard time understanding why a military with an annual budget of around \$8 billion has struggled to defeat far smaller and less technologically advanced opponents such as Hamas and Hezbollah. What many of these critics don't realize, however, is that decisive victories against such opponents are hard to achieve. Nevertheless, this gap between the public's expectations and the military's ability

to defeat unconventional opponents could become a bigger problem should another war with Hezbollah break out, for most Israelis fail to recognize how much the group's capabilities and ambitions have grown in recent years.

### **UNCONVENTIONAL WISDOM**

To deal with all these changes, soon after Eisenkot was appointed chief of staff, he introduced a five-year plan to streamline the Israeli military. By 2017, the IDF expects to reduce its 45,000-strong officer corps by 5,000; release tens of thousands of older, unfit, and poorly trained soldiers from its reserves; and eliminate many of the army's aging armored brigades, some of which used 1960s-era Patton tanks until recently. The Israeli air force has unveiled plans to get rid of dozens of its 40-year-old warplanes, including some of its older F-15s and F-16s, and purchase at least two squadrons (or around 50 planes) of new F-35 fighters from the United States. Like his predecessors, Eisenkot has also pledged to invest generously in Israel's cyberwarfare and intelligence units.

Unlike his predecessors, however, Eisenkot has acknowledged that the IDF's technological prowess may not be enough to allow it to triumph against an unconventional enemy. To fill the gap, he has refocused the army's training on countering guerilla-style opponents; updated the structure of its ground forces by, for example, establishing a new commando brigade; and revised its operational plans for defending Israel's borders to prepare elite units for offensive action. Finally, Israel's air force, army, and intelligence units are working to improve their ability to coordinate and share information in



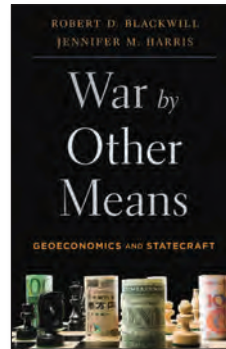
the event of a major conflict with Hezbollah.

These reforms, while important, will not help the IDF address its most immediate challenge, however: the consequences of the surge in violence that broke out in Israel and the Palestinian territories last October after Jewish radicals attempted to pray on the Temple Mount—an area known to Muslims as the Noble Sanctuary and that the Israeli government and Muslim leaders have reserved for Muslim prayer since 1967. In the intervening months, young Palestinians have carried out a string of lone-wolf attacks, ramming cars into Israeli pedestrians and soldiers or stabbing them in the streets. By early May, the assailants had killed more than 30 Israelis; the IDF, meanwhile, had killed more than 175 alleged Palestinian attackers and arrested around 2,500 more Palestinians.

So far, Israel has avoided the collective punishments, such as denying Palestinians permits to work in Israel, that it employed during the first and second intifadas. The IDF has also insisted on maintaining its cooperation with the PA's security agencies. In the months after October, Israel's security agencies began to foil an increasing number of attacks, mostly by monitoring social media. The PA has unveiled a campaign to dissuade high school students from joining the conflict, and in February, it started preemptively arresting potential assailants.

None of this has diminished the anxiety inside Israel, however, and the attacks have provoked hysterical and sometimes racist responses from both civilians and officials. Even Eisenkot has become a target of this vitriol: in

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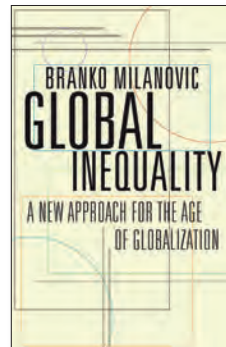
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January, for example, when he insisted that the army adhere to its rules of engagement in order to avoid unnecessary deaths, he was severely criticized, not just by right-wing backbenchers in the Knesset but also by some ministers in the governing Likud Party.

The debate turned even uglier in late March after a soldier was videotaped shooting a Palestinian assailant in the head as he lay wounded on the ground. The Israeli army charged the soldier with manslaughter. Right-wing legislators and nationalist soccer hooligans held a heated demonstration outside the military court near the southern city of Ashkelon. Posters portraying Eisenkot and then Defense Minister Moshe Yaalon as traitors appeared around the Kirya, the IDF's Tel Aviv headquarters. But Eisenkot did not crack under the pressure: the soldier's trial began in early May, and Eisenkot has insisted that he alone is responsible for defining the military's rules of engagement.

Eisenkot's deputy, Major General Yair Golan, got into even worse trouble a few days later in May, on Israel's Holocaust Remembrance Day, when he gave a speech warning of increasingly racist and violent trends in Israeli society. By claiming that he recognized some similarities between developments in contemporary Israel and "the revolting processes that occurred in Europe in general, and particularly in Germany . . . 70, 80, and 90 years ago"—an allusion to the Nazi period—Golan caused a massive scandal. Right-wing ministers demanded his resignation, and Netanyahu publicly reprimanded him for "cheapen[ing] the Holocaust." Golan will remain in office, but his chances of becoming Eisenkot's successor in 2019 now seem diminished.

(Yaalon resigned on May 20, saying that he strongly disagreed with Netanyahu's government "on moral and professional issues.")

All of this has left Eisenkot with two main challenges: defending the army and its code of ethics from both left- and right-wing critics and preparing it for war on several different and uncertain fronts. So far, he has managed the tasks well. But he increasingly finds himself at odds with many Israeli citizens, with conservative politicians, and, perhaps most important, with some of his own soldiers, who prefer to shoot Palestinian attackers first and ask questions later. At the very time the IDF should be retooling itself to confront a new set of external threats, it has found itself thrust into a new and uncomfortable role as one of the last gatekeepers of Israel's democracy. 🌐

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# Israel and the Post-American Middle East

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## Why the Status Quo Is Sustainable

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*Martin Kramer*

**W**as the feud between U.S. President Barack Obama and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, first over settlements and then over Iran, a watershed? Netanyahu, it is claimed, turned U.S. support of Israel into a partisan issue. Liberals, including many American Jews, are said to be fed up with Israel's "occupation," which will mark its 50th anniversary next year. The weakening of Israel's democratic ethos is supposedly undercutting the "shared values" argument for the relationship. Some say Israel's dogged adherence to an "unsustainable" status quo in the West Bank has made it a liability in a region in the throes of change. Israel, it is claimed, is slipping into pariah status, imposed by the global movement for Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS).

Biblical-style lamentations over Israel's final corruption have been a staple of the state's critics and die-hard anti-Zionists for 70 years. Never have they been so detached from reality. Of course, Israel

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has changed—decidedly for the better. By every measure, Israel is more globalized, prosperous, and democratic than at any time in its history. As nearby parts of the Middle East slip under waves of ruthless sectarian strife, Israel's minorities rest secure. As Europe staggers under the weight of unwanted Muslim migrants, Israel welcomes thousands of Jewish immigrants from Europe. As other Mediterranean countries struggle with debt and unemployment, Israel boasts a growing economy, supported by waves of foreign investment.

Politically, Netanyahu's tenure has been Israel's least tumultuous. Netanyahu has served longer than any other Israeli prime minister except David Ben-Gurion, yet he has led Israel in only one ground war: the limited Operation Protective Edge in Gaza in 2014. "I'd feel better if our partner was not the trigger-happy Netanyahu," wrote the *New York Times* columnist Maureen Dowd four years ago. But Netanyahu hasn't pulled triggers, even against Iran. The Israeli electorate keeps returning him to office precisely because he is risk averse: no needless wars, but no ambitious peace plans either. Although this may produce "overwhelming frustration" in Obama's White House, in Vice President Joe Biden's scolding phrase, it suits the majority of Israeli Jews just fine.

Netanyahu's endurance fuels the frustration of Israel's diminished left, too: thwarted at the ballot box, they comfort themselves with a false notion that Israel's democracy is endangered. The right made similar claims 20 years ago, culminating in the assassination of Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin. Anti-democratic forces exist in all democracies, but in Israel, they are either outside the

system or confined in smaller parties, Jewish and Arab alike. There is no mechanism by which an outlier could capture one of the main political parties in a populist upsurge, as now seems likely in the United States. Under comparable pressures of terrorism and war, even old democracies have wavered, but Israel's record of fair, free elections testifies to the depth of its homegrown democratic ethos, reinforced by a vigorous press and a vigilant judiciary.

Israel is also more secure than ever. In 1948, only 700,000 Jews faced the daunting challenge of winning independence against the arrayed armies of the Arab world. Ben-Gurion's top commanders warned him that Israel had only a 50-50 chance of victory. Today, there are over six million Israeli Jews, and Israel is among the world's most formidable military powers. It has a qualitative edge over any imaginable combination of enemies, and the ongoing digitalization of warfare has played precisely to Israel's strengths. The Arab states have dropped out of the competition, leaving the field to die-hard Islamists on Israel's borders. They champion "resistance," but their primitive rocketry and tunnel digging are ineffective. The only credible threat to a viable Israel would be a nuclear Iran. No one doubts that if Iran ever breaks out, Israel could deploy its own nuclear deterrent, independent of any constraining alliance.

And what of the Palestinians? There is no near solution to this enduring conflict, but Israel has been adept at containing its effects. There is occupied territory, but there is also unoccupied territory. Israel maintains an over-the-horizon security footprint in most of

the West Bank; Israeli-Palestinian security cooperation fills in most of the gaps. The Palestinian Authority, in the words of one wag, has become a "mini-Jordan," buttressed by a combination of foreign aid, economic growth, and the usual corruption. By the standards of today's Middle East, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict remains stable. It is prosecuted mostly at a distance, through maneuvering in international bodies and campaigns for and against BDS. These are high-decibel, low-impact confrontations. Yossi Vardi, Israel's most famous high-tech entrepreneur, summarizes the mainstream Israeli view: "I'm not at all concerned about the economic effect of BDS. We have been subject to boycotts before." And they were much worse.

Every political party in Israel has its own preferred solution to the conflict, but no solution offers an unequivocal advantage over the status quo. "The occupation as it is now can last forever, and it is better than any alternative"—this opinion, issued in April by Benny Ziffer, the literary editor of the liberal, left-wing *Haaretz*, summarizes the present Israeli consensus. It is debatable whether the two-state option has expired. But the reality on the ground doesn't resemble one state either. Half a century after the 1967 war, only five percent of Israelis live in West Bank settlements, and half of them live in the five blocs that would be retained by Israel in any two-state scenario.

In the meantime, Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates are all shaking hands with Israel, sometimes before the cameras. Israel and Russia are assiduously courting each other; still farther afield, Israel's relations with China and India are booming. The



*Mind the gap: Hillary Clinton and Benjamin Netanyahu in Jerusalem, November 2012*

genuine pariah of the Middle East is the Syrian regime, which never deigned to make peace with Israel. This last so-called steadfast Arab state is consumed from within by a great bloodbath; its nuclear project and massive stocks of chemical weapons are a distant memory.

Israel faces all manner of potential threats and challenges, but never has it been more thoroughly prepared to meet them. The notion popular among some Israeli pundits that their compatriots live in a perpetual state of paralyzing fear misleads both Israel's allies and its adversaries. Israel's leaders are cautious but confident, not easily panicked, and practiced in the very long game that everyone plays in the Middle East. Nothing leaves them so unmoved as the vacuous mantra that the status quo is unsustainable. Israel's survival has always depended on its willingness to sustain the status quo that it has created,

driving its adversaries to resignation—and compromise. This is more an art than a science, but such resolve has served Israel well over time.

### **THE SUPERPOWER RETREATS**

Still, there is a looming cloud on Israel's horizon. It isn't Iran's delayed nukes, academe's threats of boycott, or Palestinian maneuvers at the UN. It is a huge power vacuum. The United States, after a wildly erratic spree of misadventures, is backing out of the region. It is cutting its exposure to a Middle East that has consistently defied American expectations and denied successive American presidents the "mission accomplished" moments they crave. The disengagement began before Obama entered the White House, but he has accelerated it, coming to see the Middle East as a region to be avoided because it "could not be fixed—not on his watch, and not for a

generation to come.” (This was the bottom-line impression of the journalist Jeffrey Goldberg, to whom Obama granted his legacy interview on foreign policy.)

If history is precedent, this is more than a pivot. Over the last century, the Turks, the British, the French, and the Russians each had their moment in the Middle East, but prolonging it proved costly as their power ebbed. They gave up the pursuit of dominance and settled for influence. A decade ago, in the pages of this magazine, Richard Haass, the president of the Council on Foreign Relations, predicted that the United States had reached just this point: “The American era in the Middle East,” he announced, “. . . has ended.” He went on: “The United States will continue to enjoy more influence in the region than any other outside power, but its influence will be reduced from what it once was.” That was a debatable proposition in 2006; now in 2016, Obama has made it indisputable.

There are several ways to make a retreat seem other than it is. The Obama administration’s tack has been to create the illusion of a stable equilibrium, by cutting the United States’ commitments to its allies and mollifying its adversaries. And so, suddenly, none of the United States’ traditional friends is good enough to justify its full confidence. The great power must conceal its own weariness, so it pretends to be frustrated by the inconstancy of “free riders.” The resulting complaints about Israel (as well as Egypt and Saudi Arabia) serve just such a narrative.

Israel’s leaders aren’t shy about warning against the consequences of this posture, but they are careful not to think out loud about Israeli options in a post-American

Middle East. Israel wants a new memorandum of understanding with the United States, the bigger the better, as compensation for the Iran nuclear deal. It is in Israel’s interest to emphasize the importance of the U.S.-Israeli relationship as the bedrock of regional stability going forward.

But how far forward is another question. Even as Israel seeks to deepen the United States’ commitment in the short term, it knows that the unshakable bond won’t last in perpetuity. This is a lesson of history. The leaders of the Zionist movement always sought to ally their project with the dominant power of the day, but they had lived through too much European history to think that great power is ever abiding. In the twentieth century, they witnessed the collapse of old empires and the rise of new ones, each staking its claim to the Middle East in turn, each making promises and then rescinding them. When the United States’ turn came, the emerging superpower didn’t rush to embrace the Jews. They were alone during the 1930s, when the gates of the United States were closed to them. They were alone during the Holocaust, when the United States awoke too late. They were alone in 1948, when the United States placed Israel under an arms embargo, and in 1967, when a U.S. president explicitly told the Israelis that if they went to war, they would be alone.

After 1967, Israel nestled in the Pax Americana. The subsequent decades of the “special relationship” have so deepened Israel’s dependence on the United States in the military realm that many Israelis can no longer remember how Israel managed to survive without all that U.S. hardware. Israel’s own armies

of supporters in the United States, especially in the Jewish community, reinforce this mindset as they assure themselves that were it not for their lobbying efforts in Washington, Israel would be in mortal peril.

But the Obama administration has given Israelis a preview of just how the unshakable bond is likely to be shaken. This prospect might seem alarming to Israel's supporters, but the inevitable turn of the wheel was precisely the reason Zionist Jews sought sovereign independence in the first place. An independent Israel is a guarantee against the day when the Jews will again find themselves alone, and it is an operating premise of Israeli strategic thought that such a day will come.

### ISRAEL ALONE

This conviction, far from paralyzing Israel, propels it to expand its options, diversify its relationships, and build its independent capabilities. The Middle East of the next 50 years will be different from that of the last 100. There will be no hegemony-seeking outside powers. The costs of pursuing full-spectrum dominance are too high; the rewards are too few. Outside powers will pursue specific goals, related to oil or terrorism. But large swaths of the Middle East will be left to their fate, to dissolve and re-form in unpredictable ways. Israel may be asked by weaker neighbors to extend its security net to include them, as it has done for decades for Jordan. Arab concern about Iran is already doing more to normalize Israel in the region than the ever-elusive and ever-inconclusive peace process. Israel, once the fulcrum of regional conflict, will loom like a pillar of regional

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stability—not only for its own people but also for its neighbors, threatened by a rising tide of political fragmentation, economic contraction, radical Islam, and sectarian hatred.

So Israel is planning to outlast the United States in the Middle East. Israelis roll their eyes when the United States insinuates that it best understands Israel's genuine long-term interests, which Israel is supposedly too traumatized or confused to discern. Although Israel has made plenty of tactical mistakes, it is hard to argue that its strategy has been anything but a success. And given the wobbly record of the United States in achieving or even defining its interests in the Middle East, it is hard to say the same about U.S. strategy. The Obama administration has placed its bet on the Iran deal, but even the deal's most ardent advocates no longer claim to see the "arc of history" in the Middle East. In the face of the collapse of the Arab Spring, the Syrian dead, the millions of refugees, and the rise of the Islamic State, or ISIS, who can say in which direction the arc points? Or where the Iran deal will lead?

One other common American mantra deserves to be shelved. "Precisely because of our friendship," said Obama five years ago, "it is important that we tell the truth: the status quo is unsustainable, and Israel too must act boldly to advance a lasting peace." It is time for the United States to abandon this mantra, or at least modify it. Only if Israel's adversaries conclude that Israel can sustain the status quo indefinitely—Israel's military supremacy, its economic advantage, and, yes, its occupation—is there any hope that they will reconcile themselves to Israel's existence as a Jewish state. Statements like Obama's

don't sway Israel's government, which knows better, but they do fuel Arab and Iranian rejection of Israel among those who believe that the United States no longer has Israel's back. For Israel's enemies, drawing the conclusion that Israel is thus weak would be a tragic mistake: Israel is well positioned to sustain the status quo all by itself. Its long-term strategy is predicated on it.

A new U.S. administration will offer an opportunity to revisit U.S. policy, or at least U.S. rhetoric. One of the candidates, Hillary Clinton, made a statement as secretary of state in Jerusalem in 2010 that came closer to reality and practicality. "The status quo is unsustainable," she said, echoing the usual line. But she added this: "Now, that doesn't mean that it can't be sustained for a year or a decade, or two or three, but fundamentally, the status quo is unsustainable." Translation: the status quo may not be optimal, but it is sustainable, for as long as it takes.

As the United States steps back from the Middle East, this is the message Washington should send if it wants to assist Israel and other U.S. allies in filling the vacuum it will leave behind. 🌐