

# Political Role of Israel in the Middle East: History, Evolution and Contemporary Period

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## Abstract

*The Palestine-Israel dispute remains one of the most intractable issues in the Middle East, which has evaded a permanent resolution even after seven decades. The dispute has led to many wars between Israel on the one hand, and the Arab states, on the other. The Palestinian question has a significant bearing on current regional, political developments, and shapes Israel's larger policy in the region. A discussion on Israel's current role in the Middle East not only demands an understanding of the evolving political dynamics, like Iran's greater influence in the region, but also requires knowledge about the roots of the Palestine-Israel conflict. This paper provides a comprehensive overview of Israel's historical and contemporary relations with its neighbours, especially Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, Iran, Turkey and Saudi Arabia.*

**Keywords:** Middle East, Israel, Palestine, War, Peace, History, Foreign Policy.

## Introduction

The Middle East presents a tumultuous political landscape. Civil wars, sectarian tensions, tussle between regional states and scramble for greater influence by the major powers plague this

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region. While nothing exemplifies these characteristics more than the Syrian crisis, one of the most intractable issues in the Middle East has been the Arab-Israel conflict, which has lingered on for the last seven decades without a resolution in sight. Both the sides have fought five major wars, excluding the Israeli military aggression in the Gaza Strip (also referred to as Gaza) against Hamas and conducted many rounds of diplomatic talks, neither of which have led to enduring peace in the region. The root of this hostility is the Palestinian question, which remains unresolved despite the Oslo Accords of September 1993 and 1995, respectively. Israel's role in the Middle East is directly linked to the Palestinian issue and how it shaped the political dynamics of the region. History has a significant bearing on contemporary Middle East and helps one in understanding the current political trends.

The first part of the paper will discuss the Israel-Palestine conflict in its proper historical and political context and how it informed Israel's greater role in the region, which led to hostility, militarisation and an increased belligerency between the two sides. The second part will focus on Israel's relations with major actors in the region and highlight the potential political faultlines that augment the prospect of war in the Middle East. The last section will offer some concluding thoughts.

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**Figure-1**  
**Map of the Middle East**



Source: Foreign Policy Research Institute, Middle East.

### **Genesis of the Israel-Palestine Conflict**

Where do roots of the Israel-Palestine issue lie? A good beginning would be to trace it to Zionism in the late Nineteenth Century. Zionism was the driving force behind Israel's creation - the belief that the return of Jews from the diaspora to their biblical homeland would save them from the scourge of anti-Semitism prevalent in Europe.<sup>1</sup> Zionist Jews had designs to create a Jewish state in the land of Palestine. In order to start Jewish migration to Palestine, Zionists also propagated the myth that 'A land without a people, for a people without a land.'<sup>2</sup> The problem was that the

<sup>1</sup> Derek Brown, "What is Zionism?" *Guardian*, September 4, 2001, <https://www.theguardian.com/uk/2001/sep/04/race.israel>.

<sup>2</sup> Norman Finkelstein, "Myths, Old and New," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 21, no. 1(1991): 66-89, DOI: 10.2307/2537366.

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Arabs, both Muslims and Christians, and a very small indigenous population of Jews, had already been living there for centuries.

The vision of Zionism, facilitated by the *Balfour Declaration* of November 1917, indirectly helped by the Holocaust, materialised through organised and strong Jewish militias in cahoots with Great Britain, was ultimately recognised by the major powers at that time. The *Declaration* was a letter, Arthur Balfour, the-then Foreign Secretary of Great Britain, wrote in 1917 to Lord Walter Rothschild, a major figure in British Jewish community, in which he promised to establish a national home for Jewish people without harming the civil and religious rights of the non-Jewish communities.<sup>3</sup> The letter was silent about the political rights of the Arabs. The most astonishing, and one might say ludicrous, aspect of the *Balfour Declaration* was that, to quote Edward W. Said:

It was made by a European power about a non-European territory in flat disregard of both the presence and wishes of the native majority residents in that territory.<sup>4</sup>

In essence, the *Balfour Declaration* promised Jews a land where the natives made up more than 90 per cent of the population. To understand its significance, one should look at the population ratio of the native Arabs and immigrant Jews in Palestine before and after this public pledge of 1917. In 1878, the total population of Palestine was 462,465. Arab Muslims and Christians constituted 96.8 per cent, while Jews were 3.2 per cent.<sup>5</sup> By the time the United Nations (UN) announced its partition plan in 1947, the Jewish population had risen to more than 40 per cent.

The Palestinians viewed the Zionists' agenda as an attempt to strip them off their lands, in complicity with Great Britain as the mandatory power over Palestine. The sporadic resistance by Palestinians against the

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<sup>3</sup> Zena Tahhan, "100 Years on: The Balfour Declaration Explained," *Al Jazeera*, October 29, 2017, <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2017/10/100-years-balfour-declaration-explained-171028055805843.html>.

<sup>4</sup> Simon Mabon, "A Century on, the Balfour Declaration still Shapes Palestinians' Everyday Lives," *Conversation*, November 2, 2017, <http://theconversation.com/a-century-on-the-balfour-declaration-still-shapes-palestinians-everyday-lives-86662>.

<sup>5</sup> Carlow Palestine Solidarity, "The True History of Occupied Palestine: Exposing Myths Created by Zionism," YouTube, 9:48, August 6, 2014, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YgX5WitX\\_Dk&feature=youtu.be](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YgX5WitX_Dk&feature=youtu.be).

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Zionists turned into an armed insurrection in 1936, which lasted till 1939 and resulted in the deaths of thousands of people on both the sides.<sup>6</sup> The civil strife and revolts continued well into the 1940s, which finally forced Great Britain to refer the Palestinian issue to the UN.

### **UN Partition Plan and Palestinian Quest for a State**

The UN, under pressure from the United States (US) and the European powers, proposed the partition of Palestine into a Jewish state and an Arab state in November 1947. The UN Partition Plan gave the Palestinian Arabs 45 per cent of the Palestinian land, and 55 per cent to the Jews, even though the former constituted close to two-thirds of the total population (69 per cent), and held 92 per cent of the land. The UN Partition Plan gave the holy city of Jerusalem the status of *corpus separatum* - meaning it had to be dealt separately, and for the time being remain under international control.<sup>7</sup>

The Palestinians and the whole Arab world rejected the UN Partition Plan. The Palestinians argued that while they were sympathetic to the cause of the Holocaust survivors, they had no involvement in perpetrating the horrendous crimes against the Jews, and questioned why they should be made to pay the price of a crime committed by Europeans. On the other hand, the Jews instantly recognised the Plan. They were legally entitled to have 55 per cent of the land, even if this was only on paper. They actually controlled less than 10 per cent of the Palestinian land. The question, thus became, how to make a Jewish state when Palestinians outrightly rejected the Partition Plan, and were not willing to relinquish their land rights. David Ben-Gurion, one of the founders of Israel, was apt when he said:

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<sup>6</sup> Ghassan Kanafani, "The 1936-39 Revolt in Palestine" (New York: Committee for a Democratic Palestine, 1972),  
<https://www.marxists.org/archive/kanafani/1972/revolt.htm>.

<sup>7</sup> David Gerald Fincham, "Understanding the Partition Plan," *Mondoweiss*, August 2, 2015, <http://mondoweiss.net/2015/08/independent-sovereign-palestine/>.

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There is no example in history of a people saying we agree to renounce our country, let another people come and settle here and outnumber us.<sup>8</sup>

So what did the Zionists do? They waged war against the Palestinians. Haganah, Irgun and Lehi Jewish militias resorted to forceful displacement of Palestinians in an attempt to take control of the lands and settle the Jews there. The most infamous case of Zionist brutality was the massacre in Deir Yassin on April 9, 1948, in which the Jewish militias slaughtered hundreds of unarmed Palestinian men, women and children.<sup>9</sup> Such horrors were not an exception, and were deliberately committed under a well-conceived plan by the Jewish militias to forcefully displace Palestinians, demolish their villages and forcibly take their lands. Such brutalities were also meant to send a strong message to other Palestinians that if they do not surrender and relinquish their lands, their fate would not be different from the people of Deir Yassin.<sup>10</sup> Subsequently, around 30,000 Palestinian Arabs were forcibly displaced from their lands between November 1947 to May 15, 1948 when the UN officially declared the establishment of Israel as a sovereign independent state. These six months were crucial in determining the fate of the Palestinians, who were largely resisting the Jewish onslaught on their own, barring a few thousand Arab volunteers from neighbouring countries. The establishment of Israel on May 15, 1948 finally witnessed a strong response from the Arab countries who sent their regular armies into Palestine to undo the UN Partition Plan.<sup>11</sup>

When the war ended and a truce was effected by the UN in January 1949, Israel had control over 78 per cent of Palestine along with West Jerusalem. 750,000 Palestinians, constituting two-third of the population at that time, were displaced and became refugees. 400-500 of their

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<sup>8</sup> Edward Said, "Truth and Reconciliation," *Al-Ahram Weekly*, no. 412, January 14-20, 1999, <http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/Archive/1999/412/op2.htm>.

<sup>9</sup> Catrina Stewart, "A Massacre of Arabs Masked by a State of National Amnesia," *Independent*, May 10, 2010, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/a-massacre-of-arabs-masked-by-a-state-of-national-amnesia-1970018.html>.

<sup>10</sup> William James Martin, "The Deir Yassin Massacre" (Petrolia: Counter Punch, 2004), <https://www.counterpunch.org/2004/05/13/the-deir-yassin-massacre/>.

<sup>11</sup> Ilan Pappé, *The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine* (London: Oneworld Publications, 2007), 78-94.

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villages were demolished. The West Bank, along with East Jerusalem, came under the control of Jordan, while the Gaza Strip went under Egypt's control. However, Jordan and Egypt's rule over the remaining 22 per cent of the original Palestinian territory was short-lived too, since Israel successfully defeated their respective armies in the Six-Day war of 1967 and occupied the West Bank and Gaza, along with Egypt's Sinai. Israel continues to occupy Gaza and the West Bank to this day.<sup>12</sup>

In the post-1967 war period, a broad international consensus emerged in the form of the UN Security Council (UNSC) Resolution 242, which called for a political settlement between Israel and Palestine on the basis of the pre-June 1967 war borders.<sup>13</sup> It has been the basis of a two-state solution since then.<sup>14</sup> In subsequent years, especially after the disintegration of the former Soviet Union, the Arab states and the Palestinians reluctantly accepted the so-called international consensus, and came to accept Israel as a reality which simply could not be wished away. This significant policy shift can be attributed to multiple factors: the defeat in 1967, 1973 and 1982 wars; and the subsequent realisation that military imbalance was tilted against them, international consensus on a two-state solution; and the weakening of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO).

Subsequently, the Palestinians and Israel tried to work towards peace in the early 1990s. The Oslo Agreement and the subsequent *Declaration of Principles* signed between Israel and Arafat-led PLO under US mediation, reflected this fact. In return of Israel and international recognition of a politically emasculated Palestinian Self-Government Authority in the occupied West Bank and Gaza, the Palestinian leadership led by Yasir Arafat capitulated. Real issues of illegal Jewish settlements in

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<sup>12</sup> "The Arab-Israeli Wars," *Al Jazeera*, December 9, 2003,

<http://www.aljazeera.com/archive/2003/12/2008410115114656999.html#1948>.

<sup>13</sup> Noam Chomsky, *Fateful Triangle: The United States, Israel and the Palestinians*, 2nd ed. (London: Pluto Press, 1999), 221-22.

<sup>14</sup> Here, it is important to clarify that Israel did not take control of Golan Heights in the Yom Kippur War (1973). In this scribe's view, Israel occupied it in the 1967 war. Second, the 1973 war did not change the international consensus about a two-state solution. In fact, the purpose of the peace treaty with Egypt was more to atomise Arab resistance than to establish enduring peace in the region. Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982 substantiates this assertion. Not to mention Israeli and American rejection of a two-state solution.

Gaza and the West Bank, the future of Jerusalem and return of approximately 5 million Palestinian refugees were left to be discussed in the final status negotiations in a distant future. If anything, it put a gloss of justification and lent legitimacy to the ‘facts’ Israel had created on the ground. Rather than heralding an era of durable peace, it led to internal divisions within Palestine, especially within the Palestinian leadership, as well as the increased division of the Palestinian lands.

The West Bank was divided into areas A, B and C, respectively. Area C constitutes 60 per cent of the West Bank and is exclusively under Israeli control. The 708 km-long Israeli West Bank barrier *aka* the Separation Wall, which Israel started building in 2002, separated the East Jerusalem from the West Bank, thereby severing cultural and social bonds between the Palestinians living on both the sides. Administrative detentions, the grueling process of security permissions and siege of Gaza continues to make Palestinian lives extremely difficult.<sup>15</sup> The Israeli daily *Haaretz* reports that in 2016, nearly 20 children in Gaza died when their applications for an exit permit to receive medical help were denied.<sup>16</sup>

The Oslo Accords inevitably did not lead to durable peace, but certainly increased Israeli military aggression. Israel launched Operation *Defensive Shield* (2002), *Cast Lead* (2008),<sup>17</sup> and *Protective Edge* (2014)<sup>18</sup> to suppress Palestinian dissent. Over 2000 Palestinians were massacred in the 2014 military operation, including more than 500 children.

Moreover, the peace talks did not include Jerusalem. As mentioned earlier, West Jerusalem had been under Israeli control since 1948, while it occupied East Jerusalem in the Six Day War of 1967. Immediately upon occupying the West Bank in 1967, Israel annexed some 7,000 hectares of

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<sup>15</sup> B’Tselem, “Settlements” (Jerusalem: The Israeli Information Center for Human Rights in the Occupied Territories), accessed September 24, 2018, <https://www.btselem.org/topic/settlements>.

<sup>16</sup> Amira Hass, “For Some Gazans in Need of Medical Treatment, the Wait for an Exit Permit Ends in Death,” *Haaretz*, December 4, 2017, <https://www.haaretz.com/middle-east-news/palestinians/.premium-for-some-sick-gazans-the-wait-for-an-exit-permit-ends-in-death-1.5627529>.

<sup>17</sup> Raji Sourani, “Operation Cast Lead Five Years on: ‘We are Still Demanding Justice’,” *Al Jazeera*, January 19, 2014, <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2014/01/operation-cast-lead-five-years-are-still-demanding-justice-2014188116566380.html>.

<sup>18</sup> “Gaza Crisis: Toll of Operations in Gaza,” *BBC News*, September 1, 2014, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-28439404>.



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West Bank land to the municipal boundaries of Jerusalem and opened the land for Jewish settlement in order to ensure a Jewish majority. The Palestinians living in East Jerusalem were given the status of ‘permanent residents’ - a legal status accorded to foreign nationals who wish to reside in Israel.<sup>19</sup> It is for this reason that some call Israel an *apartheid state*. Ever since 1967, Israel’s policy in East Jerusalem has been driven by creating a geographical and demographic reality where Jews own and control the land by denying house permits to Palestinians. Slowly but steadily, Palestinian ownership in East Jerusalem has shrunk to just 15 per cent.<sup>20</sup> US President Donald Trump’s decision to recognise Jerusalem as the capital of Israel on December 6, 2017,<sup>21</sup> will only serve to further inflame the region.

### **Israel and Egypt**

Israel and Egypt have had a unique relationship which has involved both wars and peace treaties. Egypt was one of the leading states in the Arab military coalition war against Israel in 1948. In the aftermath of the war, Gaza came under Egypt’s control and remained so till the 1967 war, when Israel defeated the Arab armies and occupied it and took the Sinai Peninsula from Cairo. After Golda Meir, the-then Prime Minister of Israel rebuffed Egyptian President Anwar Sadat’s peace offers, both countries again went to war in 1973.<sup>22</sup> A significant milestone in the bilateral relations of the two states was the subsequent peace Accord signed at Camp David in 1979.<sup>23</sup> Israel relinquished the control of Sinai Peninsula

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<sup>19</sup> B’Tselem, “East Jerusalem” (Jerusalem: The Israeli Information Center for Human Rights in the Occupied Territories, 2017), <https://www.btselem.org/jerusalem>.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Donald Trump, “Statement by President Trump on Jerusalem” (speech, Washington, D.C., December 6, 2017), *Whitehouse.gov*, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/statement-president-trump-jerusalem/>.

<sup>22</sup> Yigal Kipnis, “Yom Kippur, The Unnecessary War?” *Los Angeles Times*, October 10, 2013, <http://www.latimes.com/opinion/op-ed/la-oe-kipnis-golda-meier-kissinger-20131010-story.html>. Israeli literature would, however, show that the peace overtures came from them rather than from Cairo. See, Gavriel Fiske, “Golda Meir Offered Egypt most of Sinai for Peace before 1973 War,” *Times of Israel*, June 9, 2013, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/golda-meir-offered-egypt-part-of-sinai-for-peace/>.

<sup>23</sup> Mona Makram-Ebeid and Shimon Shamir, “The Camp David Accords Twenty Years Later: A Balance Sheet” (Washington, D.C.: The Washington Institute for Near East

and received, in reciprocation, the recognition of its state by Egypt - the first Arab state to have a peace deal with Israel which has remained intact to this day.

The Camp David Accord benefitted both Israel and Egypt in different ways. Since the peace deal, Egypt has been able to secure substantial military aid from the US to meet its defence needs.<sup>24</sup> Besides, Western leaders have lent legitimacy to Egyptian dictators by maintaining economic and political ties, and turning a blind eye to flagrant human rights violations. For Israel, the peace treaty accrued multiple benefits:

- It atomised the Arab resistance to its colonial policies;
- It gave credence to its rhetoric that it was not averse to peacefully resolving political disputes with the Arab world, and more importantly,
- It encouraged Israel to add a new impetus to its aggressive policies in the region, as evidenced by its invasion of Lebanon in 1982.

This period also involved security cooperation between the armed forces of the two countries. Gaza is surrounded on two sides by Israel - on its west lies the Mediterranean Sea; thus, its only outside link and a crucial source for the delivery of basic amenities is the Rafah border with Egypt. More often than not, the opening of this border is subject to the vagaries of Cairo. Incumbents have usually tried to ensure that the barest minimum of economic activity takes place through this border. Palestinians have tried to undermine this economic strangulation by digging underground tunnels to bring in much-needed materials and things, but they too, have often been demolished. From 2013-15, the Egyptian security forces

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Policy, 1998), <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-camp-david-accords-twenty-years-later-a-balance-sheet>.

<sup>24</sup> Brad Plumer, "The US Gives Egypt \$1.5 Billion a Year in Aid. Here's What it Does," *Washington Post-Wonkblog*, July 9, 2013, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/wonk/wp/2013/07/09/the-u-s-gives-egypt-1-5-billion-a-year-in-aid-heres-what-it-does/?utm\\_term=.24e91d4db609](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/wonk/wp/2013/07/09/the-u-s-gives-egypt-1-5-billion-a-year-in-aid-heres-what-it-does/?utm_term=.24e91d4db609).

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bulldozed more than 3,000 homes near the border to widen this buffer zone.<sup>25</sup>

The public display of anger and protests in Egypt during Arab Spring toppled the dictatorship of Hosni Mubarak. The subsequent election of Muslim Brotherhood, led by Mohammad Morsi, evoked concerns both in Israel and the Western world regarding the status of the peace deal between Egypt and Israel. The Muslim Brotherhood had opposed the Camp David Accord and supported the Palestinian resistance group Hamas, based in Gaza. The apprehensions proved to be unfounded when Mohammad Morsi, the former President of Egypt, vowed to respect the peace treaty immediately after coming to power.<sup>26</sup> Moreover, it did little to loosen the strangulation of the Rafah border. Although, Cairo did send officials to Gaza during the 2012 conflict and severed diplomatic ties with Israel by calling back its ambassador, the ascendance to power of Muslim Brotherhood was nothing more than an uneasy interlude in the bilateral relations of the two states.

The military coup of July 2012 that toppled the elected government of Muslim Brotherhood heralded a new phase of bilateral ties between Israel and Egypt. Israel unequivocally supported the July 3 *putsch*. It made strident diplomatic efforts to garner backing in the Western capitals for military dispensation in Egypt. The post-coup period has witnessed an unprecedented growth of bilateral relations between these two states, what Nathan Thrall of the International Crisis Group (ICG) calls ‘their highest level in history’. Both countries have reinstated their ambassadors to each other’s capitals.

In 2016, Sameh Shoukry, Egypt’s Foreign Minister, visited Israel’s Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. The security cooperation between the two states is most visible in the Sinai Peninsula. A brutal insurgency, led by an Islamic State affiliate called *Wilayat Sinai*, has been raging in the Peninsula, taking a severe toll on the Egyptian armed forces. To

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<sup>25</sup> HRW, *Look for Another Homeland: Forced Evictions in Egypt’s Rafah*, report (New York: Human Rights Watch, 2015), <https://www.hrw.org/report/2015/09/22/look-another-homeland/forced-evictions-egypts-rafah>.

<sup>26</sup> Adrian Blomfield, “Mohammed Morsi Vows to Respect Egypt-Israel Peace Treaty,” *Telegraph*, August 28, 2012, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/africaandindianocean/egypt/9504601/Mohammed-Morsi-vows-to-respect-Egypt-Israel-peace-treaty.html>.

scuttle the dire scenario of a militant terrorist group controlling an area adjacent to its border, Israel has extended unprecedented help to Egyptian security forces by allowing them to operate in areas in northern Sinai against what is stipulated in the security appendix of the Camp David Accords. Thanks to this Israeli support, Egyptian security forces have been able to pound the hideouts of *Takfiri* groups with heavy weapons and air power. There have also been reports of Israeli drones and jets operating in the Sinai Peninsula.<sup>27</sup> In reciprocation, Egypt declared both the political and military wings of Hamas terrorist entities. Moreover, Egyptian authorities have kept the Rafah crossing largely sealed, exacerbating the tenuous political and economic situation in Gaza.

### **Israel and Jordan**

Not unlike Egypt, Israel's bilateral ties with Jordan have witnessed significant economic and political cooperation, but have also been marred by wars and tensions. King Abdullah of Jordan was involved with Jewish militias in the ethnic cleansing of Palestinians in 1947-48. His ambitions to play a larger role in the Arab world, rather than the catastrophe falling on Palestinians drove his policies.<sup>28</sup> This collusion explains why Israel did not enter the West Bank during the first Arab-Israel war and let it stay under Jordan's control. However, Jordan did become part of the Arab military coalition as a result of the popular outrage at the humiliation of Palestinians at the hands of the emergent Jewish state, but it was, at best, half-hearted and riddled with tussle and lack of coordination with other Arab armies, especially Egypt, where King Farooq had his own designs to become the leader of the Arab world. The 1948 war ended with the defeat of the Arab military coalition and Jordan controlling the West Bank, which Israel occupied in 1973 war.

The 1994 peace agreement, also known as the *Washington Declaration*, officially ended the war between Israel and Jordan. It called

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<sup>27</sup> David D. Kirkpatrick, "Secret Alliance: Israel Carries out Airstrikes, with Cairo's O.K.," *New York Times*, February 3, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/02/03/world/middleeast/israel-airstrikes-sinai-egypt.html>.

<sup>28</sup> Avi Shlaim, "Israel and the Arab Coalition in 1948," in *The Modern Middle East*, eds. Albert Hourani, Philip Khoury and Mary C. Wilson, 2nd ed. (New York : I.B. Tauris, 2004), 535-557.

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for the achievement of a just, lasting and comprehensive peace;<sup>29</sup> and retained Jordan's control over Haram al-Sharif (Temple Mount), which houses the al-Aqsa mosque and Dome of the Rock. Jordan shares joint custodianship with Israel of the Haram al-Sharif. Jordan is its guardian, whereas Israel takes care of its security. Both countries also share strong economic ties. Jordan does not produce oil - it is heavily dependent on Israel to meet its energy needs. Moreover, Israel also provides Amman with billions of gallons of fresh water.<sup>30</sup> In September 2016, Israel announced that it had signed a contract with Jordan Electric Company to supply 3 billion cubic meters of gas per year beginning in 2019 for the next 15 years.

In recent years, these political and diplomatic relations have been marred by other important developments. Tensions started emerging between the two countries when Israel placed metal detectors at entry points to al-Aqsa mosque in June 2017.<sup>31</sup> The subsequent protests against this move in front of the Israeli embassy in Jordan turned violent leading to the death of two Jordanian protestors by an embassy guard. To make matters worse, Israel refused to allow the Jordanian officials to question or arrest the guard, invoking the *Vienna Convention*. The guard was later given a hero's welcome in Israel.<sup>32</sup>

A more significant development was President Donald Trump's recognition of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel and his decision to shift its embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem. This created a wave of outrage in the world, especially in the Muslim countries. As a reaction to this important policy decision, the Jordanian Parliament passed a unanimous resolution calling for a review of the peace treaty. Though symbolic, its

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<sup>29</sup> "1994: Israel and Jordan Make Peace," *BBC News*, October 26, 1994, [http://news.bbc.co.uk/onthisday/hi/dates/stories/october/26/newsid\\_3764000/3764162.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/onthisday/hi/dates/stories/october/26/newsid_3764000/3764162.stm).

<sup>30</sup> Isabel Kershner, "A Rare Middle East Agreement, on Water," *New York Times*, December 9, 2013, <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/12/10/world/middleeast/israel-jordan-and-palestinians-sign-water-project-deal.html>.

<sup>31</sup> "Israel Says al-Aqsa Metal Detectors to Remain in Place Despite Deadly Violence," *New Arab*, July 23, 2017, <https://www.alaraby.co.uk/english/news/2017/7/23/israel-says-al-aqsa-metal-detectors-to-remain-in-place>.

<sup>32</sup> "Jordan FM: Hero's Welcome in Israel for Guard who Killed two a 'Disgrace'," *Times of Israel*, July 16, 2016, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/jordan-fm-heros-welcome-in-israel-for-guard-who-killed-two-a-disgrace/>.

significance was no less important. It is essential to remember that a substantial number of Jordan's population is Palestinians - some put the figure at more than 60 per cent. So, it would be natural for the government in Amman to be responsive to popular opinion, especially on as crucial an issue as Jerusalem. Given the continuous settlement policies of Israel in West Bank, its refusal to recognise the Palestinian claim to Jerusalem, and more importantly the growing impatience within Palestinians in the occupied territories, emanating from the bleak prospect of a permanent and just solution to their cause, will amplify pressure on Jordanian leaders to have their credibility further eroded and compromised if they are seen to be doing nothing other than paying lip-service to the latter.

### **Israel and Lebanon**

Israel and Lebanon have had hostile relations and witnessed military confrontation three times. Lebanon was part of the Arab coalition that fought Israel in 1948. Like other Arab countries, Lebanon maintained trade boycott with Israel and avoided diplomatic engagement with it. In the post-1948 war period till the late 1960s, an uneasy peace prevailed between the two countries. Meanwhile, Israel courted the support of Maronite Christians to protect its interests, who are an important component of the complex Lebanese social fabric.<sup>33</sup>

There are three dominant religious sects in Lebanon - Sunni Muslims, Shia Muslims and Maronite Christians. An uneasy co-existence among the different sects has alternated with tensions, and at times civil war, as witnessed in 1975, which lasted for a decade and a half.<sup>34</sup> Israel supported the Maronite Christians under the strategic rationale that it could capitalise on the latter's fears, of being a vulnerable minority in a Muslim-majority country, and help them to have a greater share in power, and do its bidding. Maronite Christians saw the support of external powers as a prop to buttress their leverage.

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<sup>33</sup> Hilal Khashan, "The Evolution of Israeli-Lebanese Relations: From Implicit Peace to Explicit Conflict," *Israel Affairs* 15, no. 4 (2009), <https://doi.org/10.1080/13537120903198589>.

<sup>34</sup> Pierre Akiki, "Lebanon's Civil War: Separating Fact from Fiction," *New Arab*, April 13, 2015, <https://www.alaraby.co.uk/english/politics/2015/4/13/lebanons-civil-war-separating-fact-from-fiction>.

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Initially, Israel's interests in Lebanon were two-fold: to secure its southern border and take control of Litani River. But as the regional situation evolved and new political developments took place, Israel's policy too adapted to these changes.<sup>35</sup>

In the 1970s, Israel's Lebanese policy was to physically obliterate the PLO, a symbol of the Palestinian resistance within the entire Muslim world. The PLO shifted its bases to southern Lebanon after the infamous 'Black September' in Jordan in 1970-71.<sup>36</sup> Black September was a brutal military campaign by Jordan against the PLO. King Hussein<sup>37</sup> alleged that PLO had established a parallel state within Jordan and its guerilla attacks against Israel invited ruthless response against Jordan, its people and infrastructure. PLO leadership was ultimately forced to flee. Israeli Defense Forces first entered Lebanon in 1978 in reaction to a militant attack by PLO which crossed the Israeli border and killed 35 Israelis. Israel unleashed brute force, killing more than 1,000 Lebanese and Palestinians.<sup>38</sup>

In 1982, Abu Nidal, a fringe faction of Palestinian resistance movement, tried unsuccessfully to assassinate Israel's ambassador to the United Kingdom. Israel retaliated by invading Lebanon.<sup>39</sup> The invasion left thousands of people dead and destroyed infrastructure and forced the PLO to flee to Tunisia. This invasion put a serious dent on PLO's organisational structure, but it also gave birth to a new resistance force, 'Hezbollah' (Arabic for the 'Party of God'), which would prove to be a tough adversary for Israel, and eventually force it to withdraw from south Lebanon in 2000.

Even before Israel's forces left Lebanon, it was clear that it would not tolerate a strong militia in its immediate neighbourhood, which had

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<sup>35</sup> Khashan, "The Evolution of Israeli-Lebanese Relations: From Implicit Peace to Explicit Conflict."

<sup>36</sup> Michael Omer-Man, "This Week in History: Black September Erupts in Jordan," *Jerusalem Post*, September 16, 2011, <http://www.jpost.com/Features/In-The-spotlight/This-Week-in-History-Black-September-erupts-in-Jordan>.

<sup>37</sup> King of Jordan from August 11, 1952 until his death on February 7, 1999.

<sup>38</sup> Noam Chomsky, "'Limited War' in Lebanon," *Chomsky.info*, September, 2003, [https://chomsky.info/199309\\_/](https://chomsky.info/199309_/).

<sup>39</sup> "The Lebanon War (1982)," *Ynetnews*, November 30, 2008, <https://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-3631005,00.html>.

the potential to challenge its notion of military invincibility and hegemony. Israel found the pretext in 2006.

In 2006, Israel initiated, what is commonly called the Second Lebanon War,<sup>40</sup> when Hezbollah kidnapped two Israeli security officers. The war lasted for 34 days. Israel claimed it was to secure the release of its soldiers, but this cloaked its hidden aims: destruction for Hezbollah's indigenous short-range missile stockpiles, bombing its command and control centres, disrupting transportation, communications and weapons. Basically, the aim of the military operation was to neutralise Hezbollah as a resistance organisation. Despite the damage to infrastructure and cost of human lives of whom, Israel failed to achieve these aims.<sup>41</sup> Both sides claimed victory, neither side won.

As to the prospect of a new war in Lebanon, its potential trigger-points and possible repercussions, it is important to properly contextualise this prognosis in the developing regional situation. Since 2013, Hezbollah has been engaged in fighting against the Syrian rebels who want to topple the Assad regime. It has enormously invested in terms of blood and money, and has so far lost more than 1,000 fighters in Syria.<sup>42</sup> Opening a new front against Israel would be tantamount to squandering in no time the gains which have taken Hezbollah years to achieve, that too with a huge cost.

As for Israel, it has been beating war drums for the longest of time. At times, its signaling has been deliberately ambiguous. For example, in an interview to a Saudi newspaper, Lt. Gen Gadi Eizenkot, Chief of General Staff of the Israel Defense Forces (IDF), said: 'Israel has no intention of initiating an attack on Hezbollah, in Lebanon.'<sup>43</sup> However, he cautioned, local flare-up could lead to a broad strategic conflict.

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<sup>40</sup> Mohammad Naved Ferdaus Iqbal, "The Second Lebanon War: Lessons Learned and the Future," *Small Wars Journal*, May 15, 2017, <http://smallwarsjournal.com/jrnl/art/the-second-lebanon-war-failures-lessons-learned-and-the-future>.

<sup>41</sup> Alastair Crooke and Mark Perry, "How Hezbollah Defeated Israel," *Asia Times Online*, October 12, 2016, [http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Middle\\_East/HJ12Ak01.html](http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Middle_East/HJ12Ak01.html).

<sup>42</sup> Ali Alfoneh, "Hezbollah Battlefield Deaths Defending Assad Mount Up," *Newsweek*, April 21, 2017, <http://www.newsweek.com/hezbollah-battlefield-deaths-defending-assad-mount-586320>.

<sup>43</sup> "Israeli Army Chief says Ready to Share Information with Saudi Arabia," *Reuters*, November 16, 2017, <https://af.reuters.com/article/worldNews/idAFKBN1DG29Z>.



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This interview was preceded by an Israeli simulated war with Hezbollah.<sup>44</sup> A massive drill was conducted by IDF Northern Command in September, in which Israel had a convincing victory. The most important component of these military drills was its reliance on a rapid ground maneuver, which Israel has not undertaken since its invasion of Lebanon in 1982. There exists this thinking with both IDF and the ruling political establishment that Israel should undertake war to achieve what it failed to do so in 2006; more so, given Hezbollah's increased tactical capabilities, especially its missile stockpile, their efficiency and range, along with its combat experience in Syria.

Discussing the likely prospect of a war in Lebanon and its consequences, it is important to go beyond IDF's simulated war and Hezbollah's tactical capabilities and take into account other factors and stakeholders. How will the Lebanese Army, which receives a substantial amount of US aid,<sup>45</sup> and Maronite Christians, led by Michel Aoun, who also happens to be the president of Lebanon, react? Michel Aoun's party is in a coalition government with Hezbollah. Moreover, Lebanon already hosts more than 2 million Syrian refugees. A new war will drive more people to become internally displaced, and may even push them to seek refuge in Jordan, which is finding it extremely difficult to cope with its own share of Syrian refugees. Will the US allow its regional ally Jordan to be destabilised? More importantly, how will Iran react?

### **Israel, Syria and Iran**

Syria and Israel have been at war since 1948.<sup>46</sup> However, since 1974, both have maintained an armistice line on the Golan Heights.<sup>47</sup> Both have also

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<sup>44</sup> Amos Harel, "Israel Simulates War with Hezbollah, but Iran will Orchestrate Next Conflict in Lebanon and Syria," *Haaretz*, September 24, 2017, <https://www.haaretz.com/middle-east-news/israel-preps-for-war-with-hezbollah-but-iran-will-orchestrate-next-conflict-1.5452319>.

<sup>45</sup> "US Pledges \$120m in Aid to Lebanese Army," *Middle East Eye*, December 14, 2017, <http://www.middleeasteye.net/news/trump-hezbollah-hariri-aid-lebanese-army-israel-1412366202>.

<sup>46</sup> "Timeline: Israel, Syria and the Golan Heights," *Guardian*, May 21, 2008, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2008/may/21/golan.background>.

<sup>47</sup> Syria actively participated in the 1967 and 1973 wars against Israel and lost a portion of its territory – the Golan Heights – to it during the 1967 war.

indulged in proxy wars and covert actions against each other. During the Lebanese civil war, Syria and Israel supported opposite camps. Syria has also played the role of a conduit for Iran to support Hezbollah. This relationship was strengthened after Hezbollah became directly involved in the 2013 Syrian civil war. The growing role of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and its allied Shia militias (e.g., Liwa Zenaibiyoun and Liwa Fatemiyoun) has not only considerably increased its influence in Syria, but also provided it with a contiguous land corridor, connecting Tehran to Beirut through Baghdad and Damascus.<sup>48</sup>

To secure its interests, Israel has pursued a two-pronged policy: conducting aerial strikes on weapons convoys headed for Hezbollah; and a campaign of assassination of key Hezbollah leaders. Secondly, it has supported some militant groups (like the Golan Knights) fighting the Assad regime. The level of support has ranged from medical aid being provided in Israeli hospitals to arms equipment.<sup>49</sup> The purpose of this policy has been to carve a cushion and a buffer zone to avert the threat of Iranian forces and its allied militias holding territory close to Israeli borders with Syria.

Israel alleges that Iran and Hezbollah want to establish this area as a second line of active confrontation against the Jewish state, in addition to south Lebanon. An Israeli Cabinet Minister has described it thus: 'Iran now has a long border with Israel, but Israel has no border with Iran.'<sup>50</sup>

It is important to assess and critically evaluate the supposed Iranian threats to Israel. Writing in daily *Haaretz*, Yagil Levy, an Israeli analyst, raises some important questions, worthy of careful deliberation. What benefits will Israel secure if Syria disintegrates? Syrian disintegration will possibly open up greater space for militant groups like the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and al-Qaeda to operate, posing a threat to Israel's security. Does not Iranian presence hinder such an eventuality and

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<sup>48</sup> Osama al-Sharif, "Tehran's Land Corridor through Syria is Now a Reality," *Arab News*, June 13, 2017, <http://www.arabnews.com/node/1114606>.

<sup>49</sup> Jonathan Spyer, "Israel is Going to War in Syria to Fight Iran," *Foreign Policy*, September 28, 2017, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2017/09/28/israel-is-going-to-war-in-syria-to-fight-iran/>.

<sup>50</sup> Harel, "Israel Simulates War with Hezbollah, but Iran will Orchestrate Next Conflict in Lebanon and Syria."

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contribute to ‘stabilising a responsible authority in Syria?’<sup>51</sup> One may add, why would Iran squander its gains by turning Syria into a base for attacking Israel and plunging Lebanon in a new round of violence, and give an excuse for groups and powers opposed to the Iran Nuclear Deal (Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action-JCPOA), to scuttle it?

This is not to exonerate Iran and its support to a Ba’athist regime nor to reject Israel’s apprehensions outright, but to try to understand the rationale that underpins the latter’s approach towards Tehran. It appears to be more about Iran not accepting Israel’s hegemony in the region than anything else. It is not without reason that Israel has been ardently campaigning against the JCPOA, despite that fact that Iran is complying with its terms. Dr Bill Foster, a US Congressman, substantiates this assertion:

Iran has disconnected, removed, and placed in International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA)-monitored storage two-thirds of its installed centrifuges, reduced its stockpile of low-enriched uranium by 98 percent, and removed all fissile material, centrifuges, and enrichment infrastructure from the underground facility at Fordow. The calandria—the core—of Iran’s heavy water nuclear reactor has been removed and filled with concrete so it is now permanently inoperable and can no longer produce plutonium. Less than a year before we implemented the terms of the agreement, Iran’s breakout time to gain enough fissile material to build a nuclear weapon was estimated to be only two to three months. Today, that breakout time has increased by a factor of five.<sup>52</sup>

### **Israel and Turkey**

Israel and Turkey enjoy cordial diplomatic and economic relations. Turkey was the first Muslim country to recognise Israel as a state in 1948. It is Israel’s sixth largest trade partner. Israel imports automobiles,

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<sup>51</sup> Yagil Levy, “Is Iran really a Threat to Israel from Syria?” *Haaretz*, November 28, 2017, <https://www.haaretz.com/opinion/.premium-is-iran-really-a-threat-to-israel-from-syria-1.5627072>.

<sup>52</sup> Bill Foster, “The Future of the Iran Nuclear Deal” (Chicago: Bulletin of Atomic Scientists, 2017), <https://thebulletin.org/future-iran-nuclear-deal11258>.

electrical devices, iron and steel; and exports chemicals, metals and raw materials to Turkey. In 2008, both states signed a multibillion Euro Mediterranean Pipeline Project, a sophisticated underwater network which will facilitate the exchange of gas, electricity, oil and water.<sup>53</sup> Despite strong economic ties, the two states have also seen political tensions on the Palestinian issue.

In recent years, Turkey has tried to chart a more independent foreign policy. President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has championed many regional causes that have simultaneously increased his constituency within Turkey and antagonised neighbours and allies. The country has overtly supported the rebel forces in Syria; and allowed itself to become a conduit for foreign fighters to go to Syria and fight alongside anti-government militant groups. It was one of the first countries to call for a No-Fly Zone (NFZ) in northern Syria, close to its borders.<sup>54</sup> This policy not only became a source of rift between Turkish-Syrian bilateral relations, but also pushed Turkey on the brink of war with Russia when Turkish F-16s shot down a Russian fighter jet in December 2015.<sup>55</sup>

Turkey also supported the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and criticised Egyptian Army Chief General Abdel Fattah el-Sisi's military coup, in the process antagonising not only the military dictator in Egypt, but also Saudi Arabia, which calls Muslim Brotherhood a terrorist organisation and considers it a threat to its interests.<sup>56</sup>

Moreover, Turkey, a NATO<sup>57</sup> member, has had divergent interests with the US. Diplomatic relations between Ankara and Washington have witnessed a new low in recent times. The US extends military support and gives air cover to the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), a predominantly

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<sup>53</sup> Daniel Heinrich, "Turkey and Israel: Animosity Ends when it Comes to Money," *Deutsche Welle*, December 12, 2017, <http://www.dw.com/en/turkey-and-israel-animosity-ends-when-it-comes-to-money/a-41766113>.

<sup>54</sup> Simon Tisdall, "Syrian Safe Zone: US Relents to Turkish Demands after Border Crisis Grows," *Guardian*, July 27, 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jul/27/syrian-safe-zone-us-relents-to-turkish-demands-border-crisis-kurd-uk-military>.

<sup>55</sup> "Turkey's Downing of Russian Warplane-What We Know," *BBC News*, December 1, 2015, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-34912581>.

<sup>56</sup> Onur Ant and Ghaith Shennib, "Saudis are after the Muslim Brotherhood, and Turkey's in the Way," *Bloomberg*, July 3, 2017, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2017-07-03/saudis-are-after-the-muslim-brotherhood-and-turkey-s-in-the-way>.

<sup>57</sup> North Atlantic Treaty Organization.

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Kurdish militia, in its fight against ISIS. The Marxist, secular and battle-hardened Kurds were seen by the US as tough fighters and potential allies, compensating for little ground presence of US soldiers in Syria. American Special Forces (ASF) have trained them and at times fought alongside Kurds.<sup>58</sup> Turkey sees the SDF as the sister organisation of the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), designated a terrorist outfit by Turkey, the European Union (EU) and the US. Turkey fears a strong Kurdish militia with modern arms and enjoying greater autonomy in Syria will create security threats for the Kurdish region in Southeast of Turkey.

Diplomatic rifts emerged between Israel and Turkey in 2009, in the aftermath of *Operation Cast Lead*. Israeli sources, explaining the strategic objectives of *Cast Lead*, said it was to ‘reestablish Israeli deterrence because its enemies are less afraid of it they once were, or should be.’<sup>59</sup> This was an indirect admission of Israel’s failure to achieve its war aims in Lebanon in 2006, when, despite its overwhelming use of aerial power, it was unable to militarily defeat Hezbollah. The latter came out of the war as an organisation largely unscathed and intact.

Erdogan has been vocal in his criticism of Israel’s treatment of Palestinians. After *Operation Cast Lead*, he publicly humiliated Israel’s President at the World Economic Forum (WEF) in Davos by saying: ‘When it comes to killing, you know well how to kill.’<sup>60</sup> In May 2010, a humanitarian flotilla from Turkey tried to defy Israel’s siege of Gaza by delivering supplies to beleaguered Palestinians. Gaza had been under a debilitating air, naval and land blockade by Israel since 2007, in reaction to Hamas coming to power as a result of transparent, fair and free elections. Among other things, this siege blocked medical supplies and material critical to civilian infrastructure. The flotilla consisted of six ships, including the Turkish flagship *Mavi Marmara*. But before reaching the Gaza Port, Israeli paratroopers attacked them in international waters,

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<sup>58</sup> Matt Bradley and Joe Parkinson, “America’s Marxist Allies against ISIS,” *Wall Street Journal*, July 24, 2015, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/americas-marxist-allies-against-isis-1437747949>.

<sup>59</sup> Ethan Bronner, “Israel Reminds Foes that it has Teeth,” *New York Times*, December 28, 2008, <https://www.nytimes.com/2008/12/29/world/middleeast/29assess.html>.

<sup>60</sup> Katrin Bennhold, “Leaders of Turkey and Israel Clash at Davos Panel,” *New York Times*, January 29, 2009, <https://www.nytimes.com/2009/01/30/world/europe/30clash.html>.

killing civilian passengers on board, most of whom were Turkish. Turkey severely criticised the attack and suspended diplomatic ties with it. The purpose of the attack was to send a strong message to those who intended to defy the siege of Gaza, but it also reflected growing political divergences on regional issues between the two countries. For example, in 2010 Turkey along with Brazil tried to have the Iran nuclear issue resolved diplomatically.<sup>61</sup> This did not go well with Israel, which wanted (and still wants) a military solution. Moreover, Turkey hosted a meeting of the 57 member states of the Organization of Islamic States (OIC) ‘to craft a collective response to Trump’s decision’ to recognise Jerusalem as Israel’s capital.<sup>62</sup>

Despite political tensions and rhetoric, the Turkish foreign policy is driven by its core political and economic interests, not by the plight of the Palestinians. When Turkey faced increasing isolation in the region, it restored its diplomatic ties with Israel. As a *quid pro quo*, Israel apologised for the military raid on the freedom flotilla, agreed to pay compensation to victims and allowed Ankara to deliver aid to Gaza,<sup>63</sup> while maintaining the siege. Moreover, Israel is an important export market for Turkish products and manufactured goods. In recent years, Israel has imported most of its oil supplies from Iraq’s semi-autonomous Kurdish Regional Government. These oil supplies have been delivered to Israel via the Turkish Port of Ceyhan.<sup>64</sup> Even during the period of diplomatic tensions and rifts, Turkey facilitated the flow of oil to Israel.

### **Israel and Saudi Arabia**

Iran’s influence in the Middle East region has seen a gradual rise in the last decade and a half. The post-invasion political arrangement in Iraq essentially allowed the Shia majority to have monopoly over power.

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<sup>61</sup> Norman G. Finkelstein, *Gaza: An Inquest into its Martyrdom* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2018), 152-153.

<sup>62</sup> Dorian Jones, “Turkey Summit Blasts Trump Decision on Jerusalem,” *Voice of America*, December 13, 2017, <https://www.voanews.com/a/islamic-world-meeting-regarding-trump-jerusalem-choice/4161688.html>.

<sup>63</sup> “Israel and Turkey Reach Deal to Restore Relations,” *Al Jazeera*, June 27, 2016, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/06/israel-turkey-reach-deal-restore-relations-160626190909435.html>.

<sup>64</sup> “Israel Turns to Kurds for Three-Quarters of its Oil Supplies,” *Financial Times*, August 23, 2015, <https://www.ft.com/content/150f00cc-472c-11e5-af2f-4d6e0e5eda22>.

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Moreover, Iran has had strong ties with Shia militias, operating independently of Iraq's government and holding considerable political clout and social influence.<sup>65</sup> Iranian-trained Shia militias played an instrumental role in defeating the Islamic State (IS) in Iraq. Through coercive diplomacy and by pulling its weight behind Baghdad, Iran helped scuttle the dream of an independent Kurdistan in northern Iraq. In addition, Syrian civil war has also substantially increased Damascus' political and economic dependence on Tehran. Through IRGC, different brigades of Shia militias and a network of dispersed military bases, Iran maintains a significant ground presence. In Yemen, Iran's influence has likely become a self-fulfilling prophecy.<sup>66</sup> Besides this, Tehran also holds considerable influence through Hezbollah in Lebanon.

In contrast, Saudi Arabia's political moves and strategic decisions to curb growing Iranian influence in the region have yielded little. At times, they have backfired. The *Operation Decisive Storm* has morphed into a protracted war and turned Yemen into a humanitarian crisis.<sup>67</sup> In the Syrian uprising of 2011, Gulf countries generally and Saudi Arabia particularly, saw an opportunity to undermine increasing Iranian influence in the region by supporting rebel forces with monetary and military supplies to topple the Assad regime in Damascus. After their initial successes, rebel forces soon fell into infighting and the ambiguity of their foreign supporters, coupled with the *Jihadi* forces taking a more prominent role within the opposition ranks, doomed the chances of their winning the war.

It is not just Saudi Arabia and the other Gulf states that view Iran's role in the Middle East as a threat, but Israel too shares their apprehensions. In this regard, there have been allusions and talk of secret and covert diplomacy between Saudi Arabia and Israel to work together to protect their common interests in the region. It is officially unacknowledged on the part of Saudi Arabia. In November 2017, Israel's

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<sup>65</sup> Vali Nasr, "Iran among the Ruins," *Foreign Policy*, February 13, 2018,

<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/middle-east/2018-02-13/iran-among-ruins>.

<sup>66</sup> Seittek Hubert, "The Yemen War: A Proxy War or a Self-Fulfilling Prophecy," *The Polish Journal of International Affairs* 26, no. 2 (2017): 38-54.

<sup>67</sup> Sharif Abdel Kouddous, "In Yemen, Civilians Suffer Relentless Bombing from Saudi-led Coalition," *Intercept*, January 11, 2016, <https://theintercept.com/2016/01/11/in-yemen-civilians-suffer-relentless-bombing-by-saudi-led-coalition/>.

Energy Minister, Yuval Steinitz shared in one of his interviews that: ‘We have ties that are indeed partly covert with many Muslim and Arab countries, whether it is with Saudi Arabia or other Arab countries.’ Giving an interview to a Saudi newspaper, General Eizenkot called for greater cooperation between the two countries because, in his words: ‘Iran is the biggest threat to the region... [as it seeks to create a] Shia crescent from Lebanon to Iran and then from the Gulf to the Red Sea.’ He also talked about Israel’s willingness to share intelligence with ‘moderate Arab states like Saudi Arabia in order to deal with Tehran.’<sup>68</sup>

The most important aspect of covert talks between Saudi Arabia and Israel came immediately before President Trump’s recognition of Jerusalem as Israel’s capital.<sup>69</sup> An American delegation, led by Jared Kushner, met Saudi Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman in November 2017 to talk about a peace plan in the Middle East. Reporting the details of the meeting, *New York Times*, quoting anonymous sources, said the Saudi Crown Prince, deviating from official policy, conceded to Israel’s position on Palestinian issues. It reports:

The Palestinians would get a state of their own but only non-contiguous parts of West Bank and only limited sovereignty over their own territory. The vast majority of Israeli settlements in the West Bank, which most of the world considers illegal, would remain. The Palestinians would not be given East Jerusalem as their capital and there would be no right of return for Palestinian refugees and their descendants.<sup>70</sup>

The report did not explain what the *quid pro quo* for Saudi Arabia was.

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<sup>68</sup> Peter Beaumont, “Israeli Military Chief Wants Closer Saudi Ties as Iran Tensions Rise,” *Guardian*, November 17, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/nov/17/israeli-military-chief-wants-closer-saudi-ties-as-iran-tensions-rise>.

<sup>69</sup> Trump, “Statement by President Trump on Jerusalem.”

<sup>70</sup> “Talk of a Peace Plan that Snubs Palestinians Roils Middle East,” *New York Times*, December 3, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/12/03/world/middleeast/palestinian-saudi-peace-plan.html>.



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Despite these public statements, interviews and talk of intelligence sharing and covert diplomacy and the shared threat they perceive from Iran, there are some serious impediments to military cooperation between the two states. One is public opinion in the Muslim world. Military and intelligence cooperation between Saudi Arabia and Israel, that not only compromises on Palestinian issue and the question of Jerusalem, but also makes Riyadh complicit in military aggression against a fellow Muslim country, would be extremely difficult and unpopular, if not impossible. Second, the shared Iranian threat is potentially a tenuous link. For Saudi Arabia, the Iranian threat derives as much from its ideology as from its geopolitics. Moreover, the theatre of Saudi Arabia-Iran proxy war through their support of groups and militias adhering to their respective religious ideologies is not limited to the Middle East. For Israel, the Iranian threat lies in its support to Hezbollah in Lebanon, and to an extent Hamas in Gaza. As long as Iran sustains support for these groups that challenge Israel's hegemony in the region, it will be perceived as a threat by Tel Aviv. Both Israel and Saudi Arabia realise that their military collaboration has severe limitations. Saudi Arabia, despite its stock of modern military weapons, has yet to prove its mastery of martial ethos, and its performance in the Yemen war does not evoke great confidence in its capability as a fighting force.

Despite its attacks on Iranian military bases in Syria and its trained militias, Israel is unlikely to go it alone, without the consent and cooperation of the US. In this regard, both Israel and Saudi Arabia have been advocating a more aggressive Washington posture towards Tehran. Both sides have also welcomed Trump's decision to tear up the JCPOA.

### **Conclusion**

The roots of Israel's role in contemporary Middle East lie in the Israel-Palestine conflict, which stands unresolved. US President Trump's December 2017 announcement to recognise Jerusalem as Israel's capital has only served to exacerbate this situation and put oil on a region already aflame. Land expropriations, Jewish settlements and deliberate and artificial changes in demographics, in flagrant breach of international law, have made the internationally agreed two-state solution nearly unviable.

*Sajid Aziz*

Moreover, to maintain its notion of complete military hegemony, Israel relies on decisive military victories and combat initiatives. Long-term peace in the region hinges on co-existence and mutual security. As long as Palestinians are denied their due political rights and a state of their own or living in a single state as equal citizens with Jews, with neighbouring Muslim countries looking out for their own state interests, this vision can not be materialised. ■