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Israel Is a World Power



THE most striking geopolitical fact about Israel on its 75th birthday is its power.

For most of its modern history, the Jewish state was a place where symbolism was almost always much larger than reality. Outsiders thought the country was more powerful than it really was, and that it took up more space on the map than it actually did. Admirers, such as the philosopher Eric Hoffer, maintained that the fate of the free world depended upon its fortunes. Bigots blamed Israel for global terrorism, oil shortages, and the absence of peace in the Middle East. I once heard a European politician say that if only the Israeli–Arab conflict could be resolved, it might also be possible to tackle climate change. He wasn't joking.

Things have changed. Israel is no longer a plucky little country us-

ing its wits to punch above its weight. Now, it's a country with weight.

In 1950, Israel had just 1.2 million people. Today, the population is just shy of 10 million, demographically in the mid-tier of nations. It has the highest fertility rate of any developed nation—roughly three live births per woman, compared with 1.6 in the United States and 0.8 in South Korea. Israel's gross domestic product has grown by more than 200 percent since the turn of the century and approaches a half-trillion dollars. It receives more foreign-direct investment than the U.K. and has a higher GDP per capita than Japan. Until recently, Israel was wholly dependent on energy imports. Now, it's a significant natural-gas exporter. This year, it also began exporting oil.

In 1967, Israel went to war against Egypt, Jordan, and Syria using British Centurion tanks and American Hawk anti-aircraft missiles. Now, Britain equips its Challenger tanks with Israel's Trophy protective systems while the U.S. defends its air base in Guam with Israel's Iron Dome. Unit 8200 is second only to America's National Security Agency in signals intelligence; the Mossad is second to none in intelligence itself. Formerly hostile states, such as Greece, have come to see the economic and diplomatic benefits of good relations with Israel; other states, such as Turkey and Sudan, have accepted their strategic necessity.

In 2015, Benjamin Netanyahu openly challenged a sitting U.S. president over his foreign-policy agenda—and wound up getting his way. Five years later, much of the Arab–Israeli conflict came to an end with the signing of the Abraham Accords. Jordan depends on Israel for fresh water. Egypt depends on Israel for reconnaissance of the Sinai. Saudi Arabia and the rest of the Arab world depend on Israel for fighting and sabotaging Iran.

Palestinians may have won the battle for hearts and minds on college campuses and some editorial pages. They are losing the battle

of priorities and attention spans in the world's foreign ministries, including those of the Arab League.

None of this is to say that Israel's challenges — foreign, domestic, and in-between — aren't grave. Other contributors to this issue of *SAPIR* address them at length. But what Israel's newfound power means is that it has strategic options it could hardly have contemplated a decade ago. What are they, and how should Israel make the best use of them? That's our subject here.



One possibility: Israel could squander its power.

As of this writing, in March 2023, it's a prospect on many minds, thanks to the most unnecessary crisis in Israeli history. Whatever the merits of judicial reform, it was not a top priority for most Israeli voters when they narrowly returned Netanyahu to office — hoping, instead, for administrative competence, domestic security, foreign-policy gravitas, sound economic management, a focus on Iran. No matter how the crisis is resolved, it is a painful reminder that the fratricidal political tendencies that undid ancient Israel are not entirely a thing of the past. And even if the resolution to the crisis comes swiftly and peacefully, it is also a necessary reminder that power can beget not just confidence but overconfidence, leading to political, diplomatic, economic, and military stumbles and long-term decline.

The point should be clear: Israel's power derives, above all, from deep internal cohesion. A boisterous but ultimately brotherly nation, in which argument leads to fresh thinking, fruitful compromise, and a unified front in the face of common dangers, will enhance that power. A suspicious and vindictive nation, in which political competition becomes a zero-sum game, will destroy it.

But will Israel really tear itself to pieces, lose its freedoms, turn into something unrecognizable to its friends?

Maybe, but I doubt it. Israelis have gone through similar periods of crisis and seemingly unbridgeable division before, particularly after the Oslo Accords. “There’s a great deal of ruin in a nation,” said Adam Smith, sometime after British forces were routed at the Battle of Saratoga. His point was that, even in the face of foreign or domestic debacles, countries have a way of bouncing back. Britain recovered from the catastrophic loss of its most important colonies and went on to dominate the 19th century. Israel, I expect, will survive this.

What are the other possibilities? I see two. The first is what might be called enhanced incrementalism. The second is radical reorientation. The wisdom of the first approach rests on the premise that Israel has time on its side. The wisdom of the second rests on the premise that it doesn’t.

Regarding the first option: Ever since Israel prevailed in the second intifada (while failing to defeat Hezbollah in the Second Lebanon War), its de facto strategy has been to achieve decisive ends by gradual means, to shift the balance of power without provoking a crisis. In many ways, the approach has been astonishingly successful.

Against Tehran’s nuclear programs, Israel has forgone an Osirak-style attack in favor of a policy of continual sabotage. Against Tehran’s regional ambitions, it has adopted an attritional approach of attacking Iranian targets without triggering all-out war. Against Hamas, it has sought to degrade the group’s capabilities without seeking outright victory. Against Hezbollah, it has adopted a policy of deterrence for the sake of a quiet northern border.

In other areas, Israel has given up on trying to solve the Palestinian issue and instead managed to cauterize it as it pursues diplomatic openings in the wider Arab world. Its growing econom-

ic clout has helped improve ties from Japan to India to Greece to Turkey. Relations with the United States have had their ups and downs in the last decade (as they did in previous decades), but American secretaries of state are clearly more reluctant now to wag a finger at Jerusalem and tell it what it must do, as they used to when Henry Kissinger or James Baker or John Kerry was in charge.

What could “enhanced incrementalism” look like going forward? A brief list of possibilities:

- A respectful partnership between Jerusalem and Washington, marked by deep military and economic ties rather than the patron-client relationship of old. The next 10-year U.S. military assistance package to Israel would be its last.
- A combination of continued sanctions on, and sabotage of, the Iranian regime, until it collapses in the face of a major popular revolt.
- A Saudi-Israeli peace agreement, cemented by a security-cooperation pact in which Jerusalem supplies Riyadh with UAVs and other advanced capabilities, and an oil pipeline runs from Abqaiq to Ashdod. The agreement could be accompanied by an end to the Arab League boycott.
- A long-term interim agreement with the Palestinians, based on renunciation of the right of return and the end of Hamas rule in Gaza, with conditions-based steps toward a demilitarized Palestinian state.
- A \$1 trillion GDP by 2035—hardly inconceivable, since GDP today is approximately double what it was 12 years ago.

- At least one Israeli university ranked among the top 30 universities worldwide. The goal could be met sooner if the Israeli government permitted some private funding for its public universities, and philanthropists agreed to endow 500 new professorships in Israel, with salaries large enough to attract the cream of global academia.

The specifics here are less important than the way in which the goals would be achieved: by staying on trend, doing more of the same, pushing slightly harder toward a plausible and desirable result. If, in fact, time is on Israel's side, its approach should be to kick the cans of crises—whether Iranian nuclearization or demands for a Palestinian state—down the road while steadily bolstering its economic, military, demographic, and diplomatic strength.

What it chiefly depends upon, beyond a return to relative political stability in Israel, is a relatively stable and predictable global order, in which events such as the war in Ukraine don't escalate and the United States remains fully engaged in the world's affairs as the preeminent liberal-democratic power.



Unfortunately, that assumption is no longer safe. The Jewish state, born in the same year as the Truman Doctrine, has mostly lived in the protective shadow of the Pax Americana. But what if democratic values cease to be adequately defended by the powerful nations of the West? How should Israel survive and thrive in a post-Pax Americana world?

It won't be simple. After Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Israel attempted to maintain a posture of rough neutrality in an effort not to alienate Moscow, which controls parts of Syrian airspace. But Jerusalem's

conspicuous caution didn't stop the Kremlin from seeking to dissolve the Jewish Agency in Russia or establishing a dangerous military alliance with Tehran. Nor did it do much to impress Ukrainians, whose battlefield successes are crucial to the broader effort to diminish, defeat, and ultimately dismantle the Moscow-Tehran-Beijing axis.

Similarly, Israel's courtship of Saudi Arabia did not stop the kingdom from reestablishing diplomatic ties with Iran, with China serving as midwife. It's too soon to tell whether the deal constitutes a limited attempt at de-escalation or, more ominously, a major geopolitical realignment, with Beijing replacing Washington as the region's foreign hegemon. But — as with Russia — it's a stark reminder that Israel will never find trustworthy partnerships with capricious autocrats, even those professing to want better relations.

Worse may yet be to come. Riyadh wants "civilian" nuclear reactors, which is the usual route to nuclear weapons. If Saudi Arabia goes nuclear, will Turkey be far behind? In Egypt, Abdel Fattah el-Sisi has now been in power for nearly a decade and shows no signs of paving the way for a successor. But his Israel-friendly country is increasingly repressive and in dismal economic shape, raising doubts about his regime's longevity. Palestinians appear to be close to another intifada, the future of the Palestinian Authority is in doubt, and Mahmoud Abbas is 87. Who picks up the pieces, and how, when the first erupts, the second collapses, and the third dies?

Then there is Iran, where the regime appears to have survived months of protest while crossing the red line of uranium enrichment that Netanyahu famously drew at the UN General Assembly in 2012. The prospect of American military action against Tehran appears distant, and effective Israeli action increasingly difficult. Will Jerusalem simply accept the logic of M.A.D. — mutual assured destruction — with a regime that often shows signs of being, quite simply, mad?

What, then, should Israel do to prepare for this kind of world? Let me first say a word about what it should *not* do if it wishes to succeed.

Israel will fail if it cannot harness its various “tribes” for the benefit of the whole country. The current crisis has animated, and profoundly alienated, the secular tribe—the tribe that is largely the reason for Israel’s economic success, technological prowess, and cultural vibrancy. The historian Walter Russell Mead put the matter well this spring when he noted that, just as David Ben-Gurion “found a way for religious Jews to flourish even as the secular majority dominated” Israel in its early years, Netanyahu must ensure that “liberal Jews feel confident that the state of Israel will remain a country they live in and love.”

Israel must also eschew a policy of degraded realism: one that says that in a world in which Israel will be condemned no matter what, it should pursue its interests without regard for moral considerations. Israel’s self-respect—expressed by doctrines such as the IDF’s “purity of arms”—is not an expensive vanity. It’s a strategic asset, particularly now, when the most successful Israelis have viable exit options and can take their families, capital, enterprise, and ideas elsewhere. It’s yet another reason for the Jewish state not to become too cozy with illiberal regimes with which its realpolitik interests overlap.

What Israel *can* do is prepare, impress, and surprise. This is “radical reorientation.”

Prepare: As recently as the mid-1990s, Israel spent more than 10 percent of its GDP on the military. (In the 1970s, the figure was north of 30 percent.) It now hovers around 5 percent—high by Western standards, and more than it used to spend in absolute terms, thanks to economic growth. But that still means a relatively small military budget of about \$24 billion, less than Iran’s and half

that of South Korea's. The war in Ukraine has shown that future wars may be protracted affairs that do not play to Israel's high-tech strengths and low tolerance for casualties. Will Israel be ready for a long war against Iran and its proxies in which Tehran — prepared as it is to sacrifice vastly more people — might be able to count on greater support from Beijing than Jerusalem can count on from Washington? The time to start thinking about the scenario, which may be 10 years off, is right now.

Impress: Israel did not achieve its recent diplomatic inroads because it made territorial concessions to Palestinians, or because its former adversaries became philosemitic. On the contrary, it did so because it proved itself a winner — the “strong horse” in the parlance of Mideast politics. It showed that it could produce results obtainable nowhere else: effective military and intelligence operations against Iran; one-of-a-kind technologies, particularly in the realms of defense and espionage; a willingness not to bend to outside pressure, including from the United States. In a world in which Israel may not be able to rely on external help in moments of grave crisis (as it did during the Yom Kippur War or the hyperinflation of the 1980s), Israeli governments will need to demonstrate that the country rarely stumbles and routinely outperforms. If the judicial-review crisis of 2023 proves to be a foretaste of Israeli politics over the next several years, the strategic ramifications will be severe. Nobody respects a loser.

Surprise: Israel has repeatedly shown that it is able fundamentally to shift expectations about what is possible. It did so 75 years ago by prevailing in the War of Independence. It did it again with the capture of Eichmann; the swift triumph of the Six-Day War; the raid on Entebbe; the Camp David Accords; the elimination of

nuclear threats from Iraq in 1981 and Syria in 2007; Netanyahu's 2015 speech to Congress about the Iran nuclear deal; the heist of Iran's nuclear secrets and the assassination of its top nuclear scientist. These against-the-odds successes aren't simply a part of Israeli lore and pride. They are a demonstration that a resourceful democracy can take the initiative against hard odds; that political life needn't be governed solely by inertia, bureaucracy, political haggling, and crisis. That sense of bold surprise will be even more necessary in a world of diffident democracies, assertive autocracies, and global disorder.

Some of the surprises Israel could spring are easily guessed. The manner of them isn't. What matters most is the motto—which should be an emblem for not only Israel's most elite special forces but also the country as a whole — “Who dares, wins.”



I wrote earlier that I think it likely that Israel will get through this season of political crisis: When nations find themselves staring into the abyss, they tend to recoil. It's entirely possible, too, that Israel will manage to avoid the parade of horrors I've listed above. Maybe the brave demonstrators in Iran will succeed in toppling the regime. Maybe Russia will be defeated in Ukraine, boosting the moral confidence of the West and causing other dictatorships to rethink their aggressive designs. Maybe a fruitful peace between Israel and its new Mideast partners will cause Palestinians to choose moderation and pragmatism for themselves as well. If they do, I'm confident that Israel will be secure enough — and wise enough — to meet the moment.

But the world may be headed in a very different direction, forcing younger Israelis to learn, as generations of Jews have learned before

them, what it truly means to confront existential risk at a national level. The good news for this generation is that they face the challenge with powers their forebears could only dream of. *

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