

The Diplomatic Report: A Monthly Review of Israel's Regional Foreign Policies

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A. Israel and the Palestinians

- **Still no peace process** - US Secretary of State Blinken [expressed](#) his support for the two-state solution but also admitted that there are limited chances for progress in the near future. At this point, the Biden administration is not expected to appoint a special envoy for the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and appointed [Hady Amr](#) as the State Department's Deputy Assistant Secretary for Israeli-Palestinian affairs. The acting US Ambassador to the UN Mills [clarified](#) that contrary to Trump's policy, Biden will promote a renewed dialogue between Israel and the Palestinians, and keep the prospect of the two-state solution possible. Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov [reiterated](#) Russia's preparedness to host an international conference for Middle East peace, as suggested by Palestinian President Abbas. In addition to Israel and the Palestinians, the other participants would include the Quartet members (US, Russia, UN and EU) together with representatives of the Arab countries with whom Israel has diplomatic relations. Egyptian Foreign Minister Shoukry [spoke](#) with the Israeli Foreign Minister Ashkenazi and with Abbas, before a [meeting](#) with his Jordanian, German and French counterparts [discussing](#) ways to advance the Middle East peace process. Meanwhile, Israel did not present any plan to promote peace, did not respond to Abbas' call for presidential and parliamentary elections in the Palestinian Authority, and the conflict is almost a non-issue in the campaigns towards the upcoming Israeli elections.
- **Creeping annexation** - Israel's Land Authority and the Ministry of Construction and Housing [published](#) tenders for 2,572 housing units across the Green Line, including 460 units in East Jerusalem. Prime Minister Netanyahu [tried](#) to legalize 46 illegal settler outposts in the West Bank, just before Biden steps into the White House. After many years, Defense Minister Gantz [advanced](#) new permits in the Civil Administration's Planning Licensing Subcommittee for Palestinian construction projects. Some were later [approved](#) despite Netanyahu's attempt to intervene and stop the process. Two new settlements were [legalized](#) as new neighborhoods in existing settlements, and another 850 housing units were also approved in the West Bank. The move drew condemnation from the Palestinian Authority, Turkey and 16 other European countries, who also called to stop the construction in Givat Hamatos. While the Israeli left came out against the new permits for settlers' housing units and the Israeli right came out against the permits for Palestinian construction projects, the Jerusalem District Court temporarily [froze](#) Givat

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Hamatos Tenders. Nonetheless, the court later [rescinded](#) the freeze and Israel's Land Authority [declared](#) the winners of the new Givat Hamatos tenders for the construction of 1,257 housing units. The Knesset's Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee discussed whether to make the Cave of the Patriarchs in Hebron wheelchair accessible, a decision that has been delayed by several court appeals. B'tselem [published](#) a position paper defining Israel as an apartheid state, which has [received](#) worldwide media coverage and which was condemned by right-wing Israeli politicians.

- **Sovereignty issues in Jerusalem** - Israel [allowed](#) Palestinian security forces to enter Kfar Aqab to restore peace in the East Jerusalem neighborhood, following a shootout between Palestinians that left three people dead. The Prime Minister's Office pushed a special construction committee in Jerusalem to convene to approve two plans for a permanent US embassy for the Americans to pick from, which were later [approved](#). Blinken [said](#) that Jerusalem is the capital of Israel and where the embassy will remain. Palestinian Prime Minister Shtayyeh [asked](#) Israel to allow Palestinians in East Jerusalem to participate in the upcoming Palestinian elections. Israel has not responded yet.
- **International humanitarian aid to Gaza continues** - It was reported that Minister Ashkenazi [talked](#) with his Qatari counterpart al-Thani as part of an Israeli effort to secure aid to the Gaza Strip. Qatar [announced](#) that it would grant 360 million USD to the Gaza Strip by the end of 2021, including 25 million USD for a [new hospital](#) in Rafah. The Qatari envoy al-Emadi and his deputy [entered](#) the Gaza Strip to hand over the first stipend for 2021. A shipment of medical aid from the UAE, overseen by Abbas's rival Dahlan has [entered](#) the Gaza Strip. Hamas' Health Ministry [said](#) that it will not send patients to the new American hospital in Gaza because the hospital does not provide treatment for cancer and Covid-19 as previously agreed. The Israeli firm Watergen, together with the Arava Institute and private donors [brought](#) two atmospheric water generators turning air into water using solar power, into the Gaza Strip, which faces acute water shortages.
- **Israel is in no rush to take responsibility for vaccinating the Palestinians** - In a response to an appeal, Israel [acknowledged](#) that it gave 100 Covid-19 vaccines to Palestinian healthcare workers in the West Bank, which will be followed by a second shipment of the second dose. Israel [agreed](#) to send another 2,000 doses to vaccinate another 1,000 Palestinian healthcare workers, after a team of experts advising the Israeli cabinet said it was in Israel's interest to vaccinate the Palestinians. It was also [reported](#) that Israel and the Palestinians held discussions to allow 10,000 Russian vaccines to enter the West Bank through Israel, given primarily to frontline healthcare workers. Due to the lockdown in Israel, Palestinian workers had to [stay](#) overnight in Israel for the entire duration of the lockdown. UN Special Coordinator to the Middle East Peace Process Wennesland [said](#) that Israel must help the Palestinians fight Covid-19, as it is in Israel's interest and in accordance with international law.

B. Israel and the Middle East

- **Formal diplomatic ties with the UAE** - Netanyahu's formal visit to the UAE and Bahrain was [planned](#) for the beginning of February after the visit was postponed twice before. The UAE [ratified](#) the peace treaty with Israel and hence the treaty formally entered into force. The UAE also [announced](#) that it will open its embassy in Tel Aviv. Israel [opened](#) its embassy in a temporary location in Abu Dhabi and its Consulate General in Dubai. Former Israeli ambassador to Turkey Na'eh, was appointed as Israel's Chargé d'Affaires,

until a permanent ambassador is appointed, and Stolman will [act](#) as the Consul General in Dubai. The Emirati Foreign Ministry [ratified](#) the visa exemption to Israeli tourists which was supposed to come into force in February. However, due to the rise of Covid-19 cases in Israel and because Israel [designated](#) the UAE as a “red country”, the Emiratis decided to [postpone](#) the exemption deal by six months. Officials in the Prime Minister’s Office [apologized](#) to the Emiratis after a senior Israeli health official shared a quote blaming the drastic increase of Covid-19 cases on Israelis returning from the UAE. The Israeli Minister of Education [spoke](#) with his Emirati counterpart.

- **Civil and economic relations with the UAE** - Dubai’s flagship airline Emirates [filed](#) a request to the Israel Airport Authority for landing and take-off slots for direct Tel Aviv-Dubai flights starting February 2021. The Israel Football Federation’s due-diligence probe of the Emirati bin Khalifa’s attempt to buy 50 percent of Beitar Jerusalem football club, [raised](#) doubts that the deal will be finalized. The Israeli Foreign Ministry [welcomed](#) The Abu Dhabi Agriculture and Food Safety Authority’s step to [regulate](#) the circulation of kosher food in the emirates. Hundreds of scientists from Israel have [implored](#) the Israeli government to stop its plan to use an old gas pipeline to transport crude oil from the Gulf to southern Europe, due to fears that leaks would decimate Israel’s renowned coral reefs. The UAE’s ambassador to the US has [spoken](#) with the director of the Washington Holocaust Museum to commemorate the Holocaust Remembrance Day. The Israeli Diamond Exchange has officially [opened](#) its office in the Dubai Diamond Exchange. Abu Dhabi’s Investment Office [chose](#) Tel Aviv as the location of one of their eight new investment hubs in the world.
- **Advancing ties with Bahrain** - Bahrain's Foreign Minister Al-Zayani participated in the Israeli Institute for National Security Studies’ annual conference and [voiced](#) his support for a united front against the Biden administration’s anticipated Iran policy. The president of the Bahraini journalist association [said](#) that Arab journalists advocating for normalization with Israel are being bullied and asked her Jewish colleagues for support. Israel’s national water company [signed](#) an agreement with Bahrain to supply the Bahrainis desalination technology for brackish water.
- **Resumption of diplomatic relations with Morocco** - The Israeli government [approved](#) the agreement with Morocco, which will now [pass](#) to the Knesset for ratification. In response to Netanyahu’s invitation, the King of Morocco [replied](#) that he will visit Israel only once the Israeli-Palestinian peace process moves forward. The Israeli Minister of Transportation [spoke](#) with her Moroccan counterpart and invited her to Israel. Israel [reopened](#) its mission in Rabat and appointed Govrin as its interim ambassador. Israel and Morocco [signed](#) an agreement allowing direct flights between the countries. Israel’s National Security Advisor Ben Shabat [spoke](#) with the Moroccan Foreign Minister and they agreed to establish working groups to advance bilateral relations, including in the fields of agriculture, water technology, environment protection and science. Israeli ambassadors in various countries held [meetings](#) with their Moroccan counterparts.
- **Normalization with more Gulf states?** – The Saudi Foreign Minister [clarified](#) that peace with Israel depends on establishing a Palestinian state with its capital in Jerusalem. It has been [reported](#) that communications between Saudi Arabia and Israel have [deteriorated](#) after Netanyahu revealed he secretly met with the Crown Prince. The Qatari Foreign Minister [said](#) that Doha does not plan to normalize relations with Israel as long as the Israeli occupation continues. The research division in the Israeli Intelligence

Ministry [issued](#) a report highlighting the importance of normalizing ties with Qatar for stability in the Gaza Strip and as “a bridge to the Muslim Brotherhood”. Kuwaiti authorities said that Kuwait will [allow](#) passengers from the Gulf with an Israeli stamp in their passport to enter the country. Israeli race drivers [travelled](#), for the first time, to Saudi Arabia to compete in the Dakar Rally under Belgian and American flags, though some reportedly entered with their Israeli passports, despite an official ban. Eliav Benjamin of the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs [said](#) that Biden’s representatives notified Israel that Biden intends to support the continuation of the normalization process.

- **Normalization with Sudan** - Before he left office, Trump’s Secretary of the Treasury Mnuchin met with the Sudanese Justice Minister in Hartoum as Sudan [signed](#) the Abraham Accords. Ashkenazi [thanked](#) the Americans for their efforts to normalize ties between Sudan and Israel. The Israeli Intelligence Minister Cohen [visited](#) Sudan and held talks with senior Sudanese officials, becoming the first Israeli minister to openly visit the Arab country.
- **Attempts to decrease tensions with Jordan** - Ashkenazi [met](#) with his Jordanian counterpart Safadi in Jordan, for the second time in two weeks, discussing resuming Israeli-Palestinian negotiations, economic cooperation and various strategic issues. King Abdullah [criticized](#) Israel’s vaccination campaign for avoiding responsibility for vaccinating the Palestinian population.
- **Egyptian public remains reluctant to normalize ties with Israel** - Ashkenazi [spoke](#) with his Egyptian counterpart Shoukry before the latter met with the foreign ministers of Jordan, Germany and France in Cairo. According to a new [poll](#) by the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Egyptians consider the Israeli-Palestinian conflict their top regional priority, only a quarter of Egyptians view positively the Abraham Accords, and about half of the public strongly oppose normalization with Israel.
- **Conflict with Iran** - [Netanyahu](#) and [Ashkenazi](#) urged the international community to respond decisively to Iran’s [announcement](#) that it will resume enriching uranium to 20 percent purity. Gantz clashed with Netanyahu and [warned](#) him not to shut the defence establishment out of talks on how to engage with Biden’s plan to rejoin the JCPOA. There has not been an orderly and comprehensive [discussion](#) yet within the Israeli political and security apparatuses, to discuss Israel’s position towards Biden’s Iran policy. Blinken spoke with Ashkenazi and the [two discussed](#) the Iranian threat and promoting peace in the Middle East. IDF Chief Kochavi [said](#) during the INSS’ annual conference that returning to the JCPOA or even a slightly improved deal, would be a mistake and he ordered the military to prepare operational plans to strike Iran’s nuclear program. The head of the Iranian presidential office [said](#) in response, that Iran will not hesitate to defend itself in the event of an Israeli attack. Netanyahu’s aides, including outgoing Israeli ambassador to the US Drexler [expressed](#) their concerns about the Biden administration’s support for the nuclear deal. US Ambassador to Israel Friedman [said](#), in a special meeting of the Knesset’s Foreign Affairs and Defence Committee before his departure, that Israel should avoid disputing with Biden over Iran. National Security Advisor Ben Shabbat, [spoke](#) on the phone with his American counterpart Sullivan and the latter promised that the US will consult with Israel on security issues, mainly Iran.

- **Israeli attacks in Syria are raising tensions with Russia** - Israel continued to [strike](#) Iranian forces or proxies in Syria. Some media reports have claimed that the American intelligence [helped](#) Israel in some of the attacks. Lavrov [criticized](#) Israel's strikes and said that Israel must stop attacking in Syria. Adding that if Israel knows of any threats from Syrian soil it must report to the Russians so they could take care of the threats.

C. Israel and Europe

- **Europe remains committed to the two-state solution** - The ambassadors to Israel of 16 European countries and the EU have [condemned](#) the Israeli construction plans in the West Bank and especially in Givat Hamatos. German Foreign Minister Mass [said](#) that annexation must be taken off the table and that the two-state solution is the only path to ensure Israel's existence as a Jewish and democratic state. The EU [urged](#) Israel to fully investigate the [shooting](#) that paralyzed a Palestinian in the West Bank.
- **Israel is looking for a path to Europe** - Ashkenazi [summarized](#) 2020 during a briefing with the Israeli ambassadors in Europe, highlighting achievements and prioritizing improving Israel-European relations in 2021. Israel's ambassador to Lisbon Gamzou [requested](#) that Portugal convinces the EU to reconvene the Israel-EU Association Council, during the Portuguese Presidency of the EU Council, which began in January.
- **Fighting anti-Semitism** – Israel's Ministry of Foreign Affairs [welcomed](#) the EU's publication of the "Handbook for the Practical Use of the IHRA Working Definition of Antisemitism". Yad Vashem [expressed](#) its support for two Polish historians facing accusations for their research [exposing](#) Poland's role in the Holocaust.

D. Israel and the Mediterranean

- **Turkey and Israel checking the waters for rapprochement** - Amid speculations on a possible rapprochement between Israel and Turkey, sources in the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs [said](#) that Israel will refuse to proceed before Turkey seizes Hamas' activities in its territory. Turkey also presented a precondition, that Israel stops its illegal actions in the West Bank, including annexation.
- **Israel strengthens its Hellenic alliance** - Cypriot President Anastasiades [asked](#) Israel for Covid-19 vaccines, a request that Netanyahu replied would be examined. Blinken [intends](#) to strengthen the cooperation between the US, Israel, Greece and Cyprus. The parliaments of [Greece](#) and [Cyprus](#) have ratified the constitution of the Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum, after other members, Egypt, Jordan, Israel and the Palestinian Authority have ratified the agreement. In commemoration of the Holocaust Remembrance Day, Greek Prime Minister Mitsotakis [met](#) with the country's first Jewish Mayor Elisaf of Ioannina city. Israel and Greece set to [sign](#) an expansive defence deal worth 1.68 billion USD over the next two decades, which includes a flight school for the Hellenic Air Force and ten training aircrafts.