

Trends in Israel's Regional Foreign Policies

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This document reviews key trends in Israel's regional foreign policy for the July-December 2022 period, which began under Lapid as prime minister and ended with the formation of a far-right government headed by Netanyahu. During Lapid's tenure, the government continued its conflict management strategy in the Palestinian arena, coordinated its moves vis-à-vis the Gaza Strip with Qatar and Egypt, which achieved relative calm; strengthened and developed relations with the new normalization states and continued attempts to draw Saudi Arabia into the circle; enhanced relations with its veteran peace partners Egypt and Jordan; kept up its campaign against the Iranian nuclear program; warmed relations with Turkey while ensuring the resilience of ties with Greece and Cyprus, and restored relations with the European Union and the US administration. Despite a more favorable attitude towards Ukraine, Lapid's government continued to refrain from expressing unequivocal support for it, and was careful not to upset Russia. Energy resources in the Mediterranean contributed to a historic agreement with Lebanon and growing regional cooperation, with the climate crisis remaining a secondary issue in policy considerations. The choice of a far-right government has generated concerns among Israel's partners and neighbors. Jordan expressed grave concern, tensions with Europe reawakened, the US administration was called upon to draw red lines for the new government, the Palestinian Authority expressed its concern over impending annexation moves, and the UN asked the International Court of Justice in The Hague to examine whether the occupation is truly temporary as Israel claims.

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1. ***The conflict management strategy, increasing violence, and creeping annexation bring Israel to the doorsteps of the International Court of Justice in The Hague*** - The Israeli government continued its policy of conflict management, with an emphasis on security coordination and improving the economic and civil lives of the Palestinians, along with continued promotion of creeping annexation and avoidance of political measures. In Gaza, Israel continued to work with Egypt, the UN, and Qatar to manage the enclave and maintain calm. Increasing settler violence, the high number of Palestinian fatalities, and the outlawing of Palestinian civil society organizations turns into an international issue, undermining security coordination with the Palestinian Authority and contributing to its ongoing weakening. In the absence of a political process, and in light of concerns ahead of the installation of a far-right government, the international debate over the ostensibly temporary nature of the Israeli occupation intensifies, and the UN General Assembly seeks a ruling from the International Court of Justice in The Hague.
2. ***Relations with the normalization countries deepen and expand, and efforts continue to draw Saudi Arabia into the normalization process*** - Reciprocal visits by senior officials continued between Israel and the normalization states – the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, and Morocco, economic agreements were signed and bilateral trade increased, new civilian cooperation initiatives were launched, and security cooperation and arms trade were strengthened. Cooperation between Israel and the normalization countries also expanded in multilateral arenas, such as the Negev Forum, the Central Command of the US Army and NATO, and the I2U2 quadrilateral framework that includes Israel, the United Arab Emirates, the United States, and India. Early signs of possible progress in the normalization process with Saudi Arabia were reflected in cooperation through a third party or an international framework. The new government has stated that it will continue strengthening the normalization process, and try to expand it.
3. ***Israel steps up its campaign to block a renewed nuclear agreement with Iran and to cripple the Iranian nuclear program*** - The Israeli government acted against a return to the nuclear agreement in the diplomatic sphere, taking care not to engage in a public confrontation on the issue with the US administration. In view of the decline of the nuclear agreement at this time, Israel and the United States signaled that the military alternative to the Iranian nuclear attack exists. Israel has acted against the Iranian presence in Syria, Lebanon, and the shipping lanes, and stressed to Europe Iran's position on Russia's side in its war in Ukraine, as evidence of Iran's negative role in the international system and the need to impose additional sanctions on it.
4. ***Israel continues to strengthen its ties with Egypt and to rehabilitate relations with Jordan*** - Israel and Egypt continued to cooperate in the management of the Gaza Strip, and in promoting regional activities, mainly in the energy sector. Among other things, the countries tried to restart the efforts to develop the gas field in Gaza. Israel continued its activities to rehabilitate and strengthen its relations with Jordan, the leaders met, promoted agreements in the fields of tourism and cooperation in the rehabilitation of the Jordan River as in the joint energy and water project between Israel, Jordan and the United Arab Emirates, and an attempt was made (unsuccessfully) to connect Jordan to the Negev Forum. Egypt and Jordan have expressed their desire for continued cooperation with Israel under the new

government, but Jordan has also expressed strong concern and even willingness to enter a confrontation in view of a change in the status quo at the holy sites in Jerusalem or the development of a third intifada.

5. ***Two years of warming relations with the EU culminate in a meeting of the Association Council and end with a new government pouring cold water over the process*** - Israel worked to strengthen relations with Europe despite its ongoing criticism of the Israeli occupation, and succeeded in bringing about a convening of the Joint Association Council. Israel and the EU agreed on Israeli participation in European cultural and police programs, but the continued European policy towards the occupation and settlement project, and the installation of the new right-wing government, halted these moves before they were officially signed.
6. ***Israel tries to support Ukraine without upsetting Russia, but ends up losing out both ways*** - The Lapid government adopted a more favorable policy on support for Ukraine compared to the policy during Bennett's tenure, but refrained from supplying it with weapons. It settled for sending humanitarian aid, and did not join to the international sanctions against Russia in its continued bid to avoid clashing with Moscow. Iranian aid to Russia nudged Israel toward closer cooperation with the West on Ukraine, but neither side was satisfied and both criticized Israel's policy. Russia warmly welcomed Netanyahu's return to office.
7. ***Israel advances normalization of relations with Turkey while advancing ties with Greece and Cyprus*** - Lapid and Erdogan agreed to restore full diplomatic relations, new ambassadors were appointed, and Israeli ministers met with their Turkish counterparts. Cooperation in trade, aviation, and security deepened, and Turkey moderated its condemnation of Israeli actions on the Palestinian front. Both sides have declared their intention to maintain the process with the new government, too. At the same time, cooperation between Israel, Greece, and Cyprus continued to deepen and expand, particularly in the security field.
8. ***Israel and Lebanon sign an agreement marking their maritime border*** - Decade-long negotiations came to a successful end when intensive American mediation and guarantees enabled Israel and Lebanon to reach agreements on the demarcation of their economic maritime border, and to allow each country to turn to the development of the underwater energy resources in its territory, while deepening their interdependence and presenting a possible example of regional cooperation between rival states.
9. ***The restoration of the "special relationship" with the US is interrupted by the new government*** - Lapid and Biden signed the "Jerusalem Declaration" emphasizing their countries' shared values of democracy and the rule of law. Cooperation against the Iranian nuclear program was tightened, a technological-strategic dialogue was launched, and Israel acceded to the US request to establish a mechanism for examining foreign (Chinese) investments in Israel. However, the US administration and the American Jewish community have expressed growing concern over the new far-right Israeli government. The administration stressed that it would continue to work with any government, but stressed its opposition to annexation and the importance of the rule of law.

10. ***The disappointing hopes of rehabilitating the foreign affairs apparatus under Lapid, dashed by the advent of the new government that resumes previous Netanyahu policy of dismantling it*** - After the upgrading of the Foreign Ministry's status under Lapid, including its significant inclusion in political processes and decision-making, the momentum stalled when Lapid failed to appoint a foreign minister upon his move to the Prime Minister's Office, ambassadors were excluded from Lapid's meetings with heads of state, and Foreign Ministry employees were forced to continue their fight for improved working conditions, facing an attempt to bypass their labor actions through the privatization of certain foreign services. The formation of the new government led to a renewed split in the foreign affairs system in view of the re-establishment of the Ministry of Strategic Affairs, the establishment of a separate publicity ministry, the transfer of regional cooperation affairs to the purview of the Minister of Education and the handling of the boycott movement to the Minister of Diaspora Affairs, as well as a job-sharing rotation in the Foreign Minister's position.

11. ***The climate crisis is mobilized for regional cooperation, but remains of secondary importance in shaping foreign policy*** - Although Israel set up a booth at the 2022 international climate conference in Sharm el-Sheikh for the first time, dispatched a diverse and larger delegation than ever before, joined the international zero emissions initiative by 2050, and took advantage of the opportunity to establish regional ties on climate issues, it did not update its greenhouse gas emissions reduction targets, already low compared with those of Western countries, did not complete the enactment of a climate law, and promoted diplomatic projects at the expense of the joint fight against the climate crisis.