

Trends in Israel's Regional Foreign Policies

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This document presents key trends in Israel's regional foreign policy from January to July 2023, corresponding to the first six months in office of Benjamin Netanyahu's sixth government. This government's composition and policies distanced Israel from the league of liberal-democratic countries - even as the continuing war in Ukraine divided the world between democratic and autocratic forces, geopolitical developments shifted the system of Middle East alliances (including China's successful Iranian-Saudi mediation), and the spreading climate crisis consequences underscored the urgency of cooperation. The government promoted an anti-democratic judicial overhaul and deepened the occupation and de facto annexation of the West Bank, generating growing tensions in relations with the United States as well as much international criticism. An attempt was made to continue managing the Israeli-Palestinian conflict with the assistance of regional and international forces, and strategic cooperation with Egypt and Jordan was maintained. Relations with the normalization countries progressed, but the Palestinian issue prevented additional countries from joining the process and convening multilateral frameworks. Israel encountered difficulties in persuading other countries to adopt its position on Iran's nuclear program, and its attempt to avoid taking sides on the war in Ukraine drew increasing criticism in the West. The rehabilitation of relations with Europe that began under the previous government was replaced by cooperation based on specific interests. The government continued to strengthen relations with Turkey, and at the same time, with Greece and Cyprus. Still, the standing of the Foreign Ministry was undermined, and it was removed from its place at the decision-making table.

1. ***Israel pays the price for the makeup of its government and its attempts to engineer a regime coup*** – Many in the Western world, including heads of state, legislators, jurists, economists, and public and intellectual figures, spoke out against the proposed regime coup in Israel, as did Jewish institutions and communities around the world. Israel's ranking on international democracy indices deteriorated, and its credit rating suffered. The Prime Minister and his cabinet members were no longer welcomed in world capitals, and some were actively boycotted by Israel's closest allies. Government representatives were challenged by Israeli and other

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demonstrators on their visits to Western countries and by increasing criticism from their hosts.

2. ***In the face of international condemnation, the government promotes annexation and deepens the occupation at an unprecedented pace and scope*** – The government transferred authority over building in the settlements to pro-settlement hardliner Bezalel Smotrich and promoted massive Jewish construction in the West Bank, granted significant budget preference to settlement development, repealed the 2005 Disengagement Law and promoted a renewed permanent settlement in Homesh in violation of its commitment to the US. These and other developments provided a tailwind for violent settler rampages against Palestinians and undermined the perception of a status quo on the Temple Mount/al-Haram al-Sharif. Palestinian terrorist attacks were exploited to legalize illegal outposts and enable the establishment of others. The international community condemned these measures and urged a halt to further settlement construction and settler violence.
3. ***Regional and international actors mobilize to help Israel's continued efforts to manage the conflict with the Palestinians*** – The regional and international community, headed by the United States, Egypt, Jordan, and Europe, mobilized to help prevent the escalation of violence during Ramadan. These allies also hosted two regional meetings on Israeli-Palestinian security coordination – in Aqaba and Sharm el-Sheikh; some Israeli ministers contacted senior Palestinian Authority (PA) officials to urge calm, promises were issued of supportive Israeli measures to strengthen the PA and the Palestinian economy, and pressure was exerted on Israel to refrain from building in the territories and other unilateral actions. Ramadan was relatively calm but was followed by another bout of fighting between Israel and the Islamic Jihad in Gaza that ended only with the help of Egypt, Qatar, and the United States.
4. ***Strategic cooperation continues with Egypt and Jordan to ease Israeli-Palestinian violence and specific crises*** – Jordan and Egypt cooperated in the international effort to prevent escalation in the Palestinian arena, hosted regional meetings in Aqaba and Sharm el-Sheikh, and stressed their commitment to advancing a solution to the Palestinian issue. Both countries strongly condemned the deepening Israeli annexation and settler violence, but continued to promote joint projects with Israel, especially in the energy sector. Specific crises, such as a deadly attack on Israeli soldiers on the Egyptian border and an attempt by a Jordanian lawmaker to smuggle weapons, were resolved through bilateral cooperation.
5. ***Normalization continues with the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain and Morocco, but the Palestinian issue restricts, delays and damages the process and efforts to expand it*** – Previous agreements between governments and business companies have been implemented and new ones have been signed, civil society organizations have promoted cooperation, tourism from Israel to normalization countries continued, and trade expanded. Government ministers visited Morocco, and teams within the multilateral frameworks continued their work. However, the tension in Jerusalem, the Gaza campaign in May, settlement construction and violence in the territories gave prominence to the Palestinian issue in the normalization process, with Israel's new allies condemning Israel's actions in

the territories, the UAE increasing its political involvement and financial support for the Palestinians and halting planned cooperation with Israel. Netanyahu's planned first visit to the UAE was postponed following Ben-Gvir's ascent to the Temple Mount/AI-Haram al-Sharif, and the Negev Forum meeting in Morocco was postponed several times and finally canceled due to the boost in settlement construction. The Americans and Saudis made clear to Israel that its actions in the Palestinian arena make it difficult for them to advance public normalization of ongoing unofficial Saudi-Israeli contacts.

6. ***Israel keeps challenging Iran in various arenas, but has trouble persuading other countries to adopt its position*** – Israel continued to act against Iran's efforts in the region and against its nuclear program. It operated clandestinely on Iranian soil, attacked Iranian forces in Syria and Lebanon, strengthened ties with Turkmenistan and Azerbaijan, cooperated with Cyprus and Turkey, and held joint military exercises with the United States to promote deterrence. The Israeli government acted on the diplomatic level in a bid to persuade other countries to increase pressure on Iran, and tried to leverage Iran's support for Russia's war in Ukraine to that end. US-Israel tensions over Iran arose despite ongoing dialogue between them on this issue, while the administration made progress toward an agreement with Iran on its nuclear program.
7. ***Israel continues to refrain from expressing full support for Ukraine and condemning Russia, and is increasingly criticized by Ukrainians and their Western partners*** – Israel kept up its humanitarian aid to Ukraine but avoided condemnation of Russia and declined Ukrainian requests for more significant support. Foreign Minister Cohen made his first visit to Ukraine but also refrained from condemning Russia. His promises to provide Ukraine with aerial warning systems have yet to be realized and, in any case, do not correspond with Ukraine's request for Israeli air defense systems. Ukraine made it clear that Israel's neutrality is in fact a pro-Russian position.
8. ***The process of rehabilitating relations with the EU is replaced by promoting functional relations, against the backdrop of the war in Ukraine and European criticism of the occupation and the regime coup*** – Israel accepted the EU's proposal to schedule a meeting of the Association Council, although no date has yet been set, and continued to promote joint regional projects with the Europeans. Israel continued its dialogue with European leaders on the Iranian issue, the fight against anti-Semitism and the Abraham Accords. The war in Ukraine boosted Israeli arms sales to EU member states, even as the government's regime coup became a regular agenda item in conversations between the sides. Netanyahu's government was in touch with Orban's government in Hungary and Duda's in Poland in the context of the regime coup, boosting relations with Poland by reaching an agreement that accepts the Polish narrative on Holocaust remembrance.
9. ***Israel continues to restore relations with Turkey, at the same time strengthening relations with Greece and Cyprus*** – Despite Turkey's public criticism of the Israeli government's moves in the Palestinian arena, efforts continued to improve bilateral relations. Israel assisted Turkey in the wake of the disastrous February earthquake, aid that was highly appreciated by the Turks. At the same time, Israel continued to bolster its cooperation with Greece and Cyprus, with an emphasis on security and energy.

10. ***Israel and the United States try to ease growing tensions over the planned Israeli regime coup and its deepening West Bank occupation and to prevent these issues from turning into a deep rift between them*** – The United States expressed its opposition to the government-led coup, emphasized the democratic values on which its alliance with Israel is based, and pressed for controversial legislation to be achieved through broad consensus. The Israeli government tried to calm US concerns about the threat to Israeli democracy emanating from its judicial overhaul, while at the same time making clear it views the US stand as interference in its domestic affairs. Nonetheless, relations deteriorated over Israel's continued efforts to weaken its judiciary, its repeal of the Disengagement Law and settlers' return to Homesh contrary to Israel's commitment to the United States. Tensions were also exacerbated by the transfer of building authority in the territories to Smotrich, by settler pogroms against Palestinians, and condemnation of Biden and his administration by several government ministers. The White House continued to shun Netanyahu by refusing to issue an invitation to the White House, also boycotting his top allies, Finance Minister Smotrich and Public Security Minister Ben-Gvir. The administration tried to distinguish between continued US support for Israel, for example through participation in marking Israel's 75th anniversary celebrations, visits by senior US officials to Israel, continued security and political coordination, and a White House invitation issued to President Herzog, and between the current government's actions, especially its attempted regime coup and occupation. The administration reverted to past US policy of refusing to cooperate with Israeli academic institutions located in the settlements.

11. ***The Foreign Ministry is removed from the decision-making table and struggles to maintain its standing and budget*** – Netanyahu reversed the previous government's efforts to restore power and authority to the Foreign Ministry and rehabilitate its status, reestablishing the Ministry of Strategic Affairs headed by his confidante Ron Dermer. In fact, Dermer has become a leading figure in diplomatic moves, more so than the foreign minister. In addition, the government decided to rotate the foreign minister's post between two Likud contenders for domestic political reasons, established a Ministry of Information, and weakened the Ministry of Regional Cooperation. The foreign minister and his ministry were kept out of security-political decision-making and Foreign Ministry employees resumed their fight for improved working conditions and a return of their trusted standing.