

Trends in Israel's Regional Foreign Policies

Issue No. 12, July - December 2023

Editors: Dr. Roeë Kibrik and Dr. Orni Livny^{1*}

This document outlines key trends in Israel's regional foreign policy from July to December 2023. This timeframe is comprised of two distinct halves: the three months leading up to the Oct. 7 Hamas massacre and the three months following Israel's declaration of war against Hamas. Throughout 2023, the Israeli government was preoccupied with promoting a deeply controversial judicial overhaul, and failed to focus on key security issues. Moreover, the internal division generated by the attempted judicial overhaul weakened Israel's deterrence vis-à-vis its enemies, while the guiding policy concepts of conflict management with the Palestinians, and differentiation between Gaza and the West Bank, resulted in slaughter and war. Even while it engaged in war, the government continued to promote the same concepts and trends that led to the catastrophe – avoiding strategic decisions, promoting annexation and dispossession in the West Bank, and weakening the Palestinian Authority. In other areas, the war in Gaza led to a reversal of trends, or a change in their pace, tone, or public profile.

The war suspended the attempted judicial overhaul that had colored Israel's foreign relations until Oct. 7. Despite their pronounced criticism of the government's attempts to weaken Israel's judiciary, the United States and Europe have been largely supportive of the war against Hamas. The normalization processes with the United Arab Emirates, Morocco, and Bahrain, along with significant indications of impending normalization with Saudi Arabia, were suspended with the start of the war. Relations with Greece and Cyprus continued, but the significant rapprochement process with Turkey turned into a crisis. The war exacerbated tension and suspicion underlying relations between Israel and the governments of Jordan and Egypt. Regarding the war in Ukraine, Israel maintained its fence-straddling strategy, avoiding voicing unequivocal support. for Ukraine, and refraining from publicly criticizing Russia.

^{*} Dr. Roeë Kibrik is the Mitvim Institute's research director; Dr. Orni Livny is the institute's deputy director. This document is based on the Institute's Diplomatic Reports that review monthly developments in Israel-Palestinian relations, Israel's relations with the Middle East, Europe and the Mediterranean Basin, and the performance of the Israeli Foreign Service. The document is published in conjunction with the Friedrich Ebert Foundation. Contributors include Nimrod Goren, Gil Murciano, Daniel Shek, Nadav Tamir, Baruch Binah, Revital Poleg, Michael Harari, Ehud Eiran, Jeremy Issacharoff, Gal Siegler and Michal Yam.

1. ***The Israeli-Palestinian conflict returns to center stage with the Oct. 7 Hamas massacre and the resulting war in Gaza and other fronts. The Israeli government makes efforts to maintain its conflict management approach and avoid strategic decisions.*** Israel's conflict management mechanism vis-a-vis Gaza, and its policy of differentiation between Gaza and the West Bank continued until October, inter alia through the ongoing transfer of Qatari funds, an increase in permits for Gazans to work in Israel, and measured responses to Hamas demonstrations along the fence. On Oct. 7, Hamas launched a surprise attack on the western Negev region, committing a horrific massacre. In response, Israel declared war with the primary objective of eliminating Hamas as its main goal. Israel launched a military campaign against Hamas, but continues to adamantly avoid discussing objectives for the day after the war.
2. ***Israel leads a contradictory policy concerning the Palestinian issue, simultaneously promoting annexation and transfer, and undermining the Palestinian Authority, but also trying to prevent its collapse.*** While the government has taken measures to avert the collapse of the Palestinian Authority, such as promoting economic concessions and transferring equipment to the Palestinian security forces, it has simultaneously deducted additional funds from the PA, backed settler violence, attacked the PA politically, and resisted international appeals to restore control of Gaza by a reformed PA. At the same time, the government continues to promote construction in the settlements, and annexation, allocating substantial budgets for these objectives. The war in Gaza has prompted some within the government to call for resettlement of the enclave and the transfer of its Palestinian residents.
3. ***The war undermines Israel's relations with Arab states, demonstrating that the resolution of the Palestinian issue cannot be "bypassed", but ties maintained*** Before the war, Israel and the normalization countries continued on their course of developing relations, while the United States worked to promote normalization between Israel and Saudi Arabia. However, the war in Gaza halted progress in relations with the United Arab Emirates, Morocco, and Bahrain, and lowered the profile of relations, although they remained. The normalization process with Saudi Arabia has been suspended. The political and diplomatic tension between Israel, Egypt and Jordan increased in light of the war - nevertheless, extensive collaboration at professional levels continued.
4. ***Escalating campaign with Hezbollah in keeping with informal agreed-upon framework.*** Hezbollah chose to raise the level of tension with Israel in July by erecting tents in Israeli territory, sabotaging border fence cameras, and even firing at Israel. Israel responded with targeted fire, preferring to seek a diplomatic solution to the border dispute. Hezbollah refrained from fully joining the campaign against Hamas, and Israel complied with the US demand for restraint. Israel evacuated tens of thousands of residents from northern border communities and exchanged fire with Hezbollah within the constraints of the unspoken agreement. Israel supported diplomatic efforts by France and the United States to implement Resolution 1701, aiming to push Hezbollah beyond the Litani River, and threatened a military operation if diplomacy fails.

5. ***Israel is unable to present a coherent and effective foreign policy vis-à-vis Iran's activity and the multi-front campaign it supports.*** Israel failed to present an effective policy on Iran's accelerated uranium enrichment, its military activity against Israel through its proxies - Hezbollah in Lebanon and Syria, the Houthis in Yemen, and its loyalist groups in Iraq - and its diplomatic rapprochement efforts with Arab states in the region. Instead, Israel focused on containing the threat, relying on the United States and other countries operating against the Iranian-Russian axis, and refrained from presenting a regional political initiative against Iran which could hold potential implications for decisions in the Palestinian arena.
6. ***The Israeli government challenges the democratic world by attempting a judicial overhaul, adopting policies that clash with the Biden Administration, and avoiding unequivocal support for Ukraine.*** The government-led campaign to curtail the power of the judiciary was a focal point in the West's relations with Israel until Oct. 7, eliciting criticism and concern. Despite unprecedented US support for Israel in its war against Hamas, the Israeli government rebuffed American demands to outline an exit strategy from the war and to adhere to international law in the fighting. Some government ministers voiced criticism of these demands. The Israeli government also continued to avoid unequivocal support for Ukraine and the West vis-a-vis Russia, and refrained from public criticism of Moscow.
7. ***Europe's harsh criticism of the judicial overhaul is replaced by unprecedented support for Israel in its war against Hamas.*** EU member states and other European countries strongly criticized the judicial overhaul promoted by the Israeli government. However, Europe staunchly backed Israel's war in Gaza in light of the horrific Hamas massacre, taking an unusual stand in the Palestinian context. Senior European officials paid visits to Israel to express support and condolence to Israel, and provided it with diplomatic support. However, despite this support, the war generated severe anti-Semitic incidents in Europe, impairing civil cooperation. As images of widespread civilian casualties in Gaza surfaced and Israel refrained from discussing the day after the war, more critical voices emerged. While diplomatic support for Israel remained high, signs of erosion appeared.
8. ***Relations with Greece and Cyprus continue to strengthen, whereas the rehabilitation of relations with Turkey is reversed and reaches a point of crisis.*** Leaders and senior officials from Greece, Cyprus, and Israel engaged in multiple summit meetings and joint military exercises. Israel also provided assistance in extinguishing wildfires, and tourism flourished as collaborations deepened. Efforts were made to foster a rapprochement with Turkey, including a Netanyahu-Erdogan meeting. With the outbreak of the war in Gaza, Greece and Cyprus stood by Israel, with Cyprus offering to provide a humanitarian corridor to Gaza in coordination with Israel. Conversely, relations with Turkey deteriorated amid mutual vitriol between Erdogan and Netanyahu.
9. ***Israel's foreign affairs system is weakened and its officials are excluded from governmental decision making.*** The weakening of the Foreign Ministry continued, marked by labor disputes, budgetary shortfalls, a rotation of foreign ministers, and exclusion of the Foreign Ministry from high-level decision-making tables. Strategic Affairs Minister Dermer and NSC head Hanegbi took the foreign minister's place in strategic missions. During the campaign in Gaza, the Foreign Ministry focused on public diplomacy efforts to promote support for the military campaign, but was not

included in political efforts to serve the goals of the war. The inefficacy of the foreign affairs system spawned an array of civilian volunteer initiatives aimed at explaining government policy and promoting the release of Israeli abductees.

10. ***Climate crisis policy is relegated to the sidelines.*** The Israeli government has not perceived the climate crisis as a central agenda item, but before the war in Gaza, it adopted a limited climate law, promoted inter-ministerial staff work, and planned to send a large ministerial delegation headed by the prime minister and president to the climate conference in Dubai. The war in Gaza shifted governmental priorities, leading to the exclusion of the climate crisis from the policy agenda. The president alone led the Israeli delegation to the Dubai conference. Furthermore, the Emirati-Jordanian-Israeli water and electricity project was suspended due to the war.