

Trends in Israel's Regional Foreign Policies

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This document reviews key trends in Israel's regional foreign policy from July to December 2024, during a period marked by the continuing power struggle between the US-led Western axis and the Chinese-Russian-Iranian axis, with the Middle Eastern arena serving as another battlefield. The significant blow to Hezbollah and the fall of the Assad regime toward the end of this period triggered a regional strategic shift with Iran's loss of key proxies and the opportunities for other regional actors to exert influence in Lebanon and Syria. This period was also shaped by the US presidential campaign, which led to a suspension of significant diplomatic initiatives as the world awaited Washington's election results. Additionally, major European governments faced increasing instability. Meanwhile, Israel waged a low-intensity war in Gaza, with its army deeply entrenched in the enclave. The government actively blocked a hostage deal (happily signed at January 2025) to end the war, refused to discuss Gaza's post-war future, and accelerated the de facto annexation of the West Bank. Following its activity in Gaza and the West Bank, Israel faced growing accusations of breaching international law and committing humanitarian violations. Israeli military actions, including a ground incursion into Lebanon, significantly damaged Hezbollah and led to a ceasefire agreement. Israeli airstrikes and defensive measures crippled Iran's air defense systems, highlighting the potential for regional cooperation. Collectively, these actions weakened Iran's regional influence and indirectly contributed to the Assad regime's collapse. These efforts significantly improved Israel's short-term strategic security, restored its deterrence, and showcased its strengths on the global stage. At the same time, the heavy death toll in Gaza, coupled with Israel's refusal to engage in political negotiations with the Palestinians, led many to perceive it as a 'threshold pariah' state, risking long-term damage.

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1. ***The Israeli government keeps thwarting regional and international mediation attempts to end the war and promote a hostage deal in accordance with the Biden plan, signaling that it intends to maintain a military presence in Gaza and refusing to discuss the "day after the war"*** - The Western and Arab world undertook efforts to promote a clear outline for ending the war in Gaza and implementing a hostage deal, including Israel's withdrawal from Gaza, the re-entry of the Palestinian Authority, and initiating a clear political process to implement the two-state solution. Israel participated in various rounds of talks in Qatar and Egypt but steadfastly rejected Hamas demands to vacate Gaza and end the war. It also opposed the proposals for a reformed Palestinian Authority to replace Hamas and govern Gaza. Faced with opportunities to clinch a deal, Israel created obstacles, adding new terms and conditions (such as its insistence on a military presence along the "Philadelphi corridor"). Israel's refusal to initiate or discuss post-war arrangements for Gaza placed it at odds with the rest of the world, contributed to renewing Hamas civilian control of the Gaza Strip and to the ongoing low-intensity war, prevented a hostage release deal, and signaled intentions to maintain a long-term presence in Gaza.
2. ***Israeli military action in Gaza and its deepening occupation of the West Bank result in international arrest warrants against the prime minister and defense minister, growing international allegations of war crimes, crimes against humanity and ethnic cleansing, and increasing ostracism*** - Israel moved to expel the Palestinian population of the northern Gaza Strip, while halting the delivery of humanitarian aid into the area (which was subsequently renewed to some extent under US pressure), and undertaking massive destruction of residential areas. Difficulties in the delivery of humanitarian aid due to the lack of an alternative to Hamas, the looting of aid trucks and risks to aid workers, together with the winter conditions, exacerbated the humanitarian disaster. Citing the scale of civilian casualties and destruction in Gaza, many international reports accused Israel of crimes against humanity, ethnic cleansing, and even genocide. The International Court of Justice ruled that the Israeli occupation is illegal and must end as soon as possible, the International Criminal Court issued arrest warrants for Prime Minister Netanyahu and Defense Minister Gallant, and Israel's failure to establish a state commission of inquiry into the events of Oct. 7 and treat suspected violations of international law led to an international drive to prosecute Israeli soldiers in other courts around the world.
3. ***The Israeli government accelerates annexation processes in the West Bank thereby precluding the feasibility of the two-state solution, and supports and encourages settlement and outpost expansion without public discussion of the issue or official decisions. International sanctions on settlers and the settlement movement fail to change course*** - The Israeli government continued implementing measures in violation of the Oslo Accords in order to deepen annexation of the West Bank without a formal decision and political and public discussion of the issue. These measures included designating thousands of acres as state land, constructing settlements, and establishing outposts. They also involved transferring millions of shekels for settlement development, building strategic infrastructure in Area C, and weakening the Palestinian Authority through legislation and withholding funds. Other actions included legislation against UNRWA, supporting

settler violence backed by the military to abuse and expel Palestinian communities, assuming civilian authority over Area B, and changing status quo in Jerusalem by promoting prayer on the Temple Mount and evicting Palestinians from East Jerusalem neighborhoods. The government continued its efforts to weaken the Palestinian Authority despite the anti-Hamas campaign the PA mounted in the Jenin area, with Israeli military and international support. Some Western countries, led by US example, imposed sanctions on individuals and organizations of the settlement movement, and attacked the Israeli government's annexation policy, but failed to prevent the push for annexation.

4. ***Israel escalates the campaign against Hezbollah, and successful military operations severely damage it and lead the parties to agree to a ceasefire and re-implement Resolution 1701*** - Israel disregarded US efforts to prevent escalation in the north and mounted massive strikes against Hezbollah. These strikes killed its secretary-general Nasrallah, dismantled the group's chain of command, and severely damaged the organization. With American and French mediation, Israel and Hezbollah subsequently agreed to a 60-day ceasefire based on the terms of Resolution 1701. The parties began implementing the deal, with the Lebanese army deploying in the south of the country and the IDF starting to withdraw its forces. However, Israel continued attacking Hezbollah activities to reshape the rules of engagement from the outset, aiming to foil any signs of militia buildup along the border.
5. ***With the collapse of the Assad regime, Israel's military moves to counter potential risks, but the government does little to take political and diplomatic advantage of the opportunities for cooperation with other stakeholders in Syria*** - with the collapse of the Assad regime Israel seized a buffer zone along the border in Syrian territory, including the strategically placed Syrian Mount Hermon, and announced that the 1974 Israel-Syria force separation agreement had collapsed. The military took advantage of the opportunity to destroy many of the Syrian army's military capabilities. Regional countries condemned the seizure of Syrian territory, and Israel failed to exploit the opportunity to initiate diplomatic moves within the framework of the regional reshaping.
6. ***The Israel-Iran conflict is reshaped by direct attacks between the sides given the collapse of Iran's proxies, pushing Iran towards a decision on its nuclear program*** - The blow to Hamas in Gaza, the weakening of Hezbollah and its agreement to a ceasefire with Israel, the fall of the Assad regime, Russia's resulting withdrawal from Syria, and the cessation of rocket fire by Iran-allied militias in Iraq, deprived Iran of significant capabilities to attack or deter Israel. Only the Houthis in Yemen intensified their attacks on Israel and continued to block the Red Sea's maritime route. Iran launched a missile attack on Israel following the assassination of Haniyeh on its soil. Israel's allies once again stood by it in repelling the attack, demonstrating the strategic potential of regional cooperation. Israel responded by targeting Iran's air defense systems, leaving them vulnerable to further attacks, and attacked civilian infrastructure in Yemen. Amid Iran's growing sense of vulnerability, indications emerged of a domestic struggle over the future of the country's nuclear program - whether to pursue a nuclear bomb or an agreement with Trump's United States.

7. ***Israel's Arab allies are frustrated by its policy on the territories and the continued Gaza war, but nonetheless continue cooperating with it in the face of regional security challenges*** - Egypt tried unsuccessfully to mediate an end to the fighting in Gaza and bring about a hostage deal, accusing Israel of acting based on political considerations. Israel's insistence on controlling the Philadelphi Route and the Rafah crossing, citing these as reasons to block a hostage deal, increased tensions between the two countries. Jordan expressed renewed concern about the change in the status quo in Jerusalem and the West Bank, leading to increased public pressure against its ties with Israel. The countries nonetheless continued their close security cooperation to counter Iran, while addressing the consequences of the fall of the Assad regime. The United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, and Morocco did not sever relations with Israel, but refrained from promoting groundbreaking cooperation projects, while Saudi Arabia reiterated that it would not agree to normalize ties with Israel unless the war in Gaza ends and Israel agrees to a meaningful political process culminating in the establishment of a Palestinian state. The Abraham Accord states expressed willingness to assist Gaza's reconstruction processes if Israel determines to resolve the Palestinian issue.

8. ***Israel benefits from an absence of European consensus on Gaza and the geopolitical changes that emphasize its equity, both of which blunt the harsh criticism of the war and violation of international law to some extent. The war in Gaza has become a political issue in the various countries that adopt an independent policy toward Israel, which in turn distances itself from criticism, and seeks more favorable places for connections among extremist and even neo-Nazi elements*** - The European Union attempted to play a significant role in ending the war and promoting peace in the region, while criticizing the death toll in Gaza and the continued Israeli occupation. Western European countries provided Israel with political and security backing, but also pledged to uphold international law including respecting the ICC's arrest warrants against Israeli leaders, as well as to reduce arms trade with Israel. Israel closed its embassy in Ireland and cooled its relations and cooperation with Norway, while government ministers Redirecting its diplomatic efforts toward building connections with Eastern European countries and far-right parties and candidates. With the replacement of High Representative for Foreign Affairs Borrell with Kallas, Israel successfully lobbied for convening a meeting of the Association Council.

9. ***The crisis with Turkey deepens along its growing regional dominance, while Cyprus and Greece provide Israel with strategic depth*** - Turkey moved to expand its restrictions on trade with Israel, including blocking trade through third countries and the Palestinian Authority. However, oil imports from Azerbaijan through Turkey to Israel continued, as did Turkey's use of Israel's Haifa port to ship exports to the Gulf. President Erdogan came out against Israel's policy in Gaza and Syria, seeking to isolate it on the global stage as his country increased its regional dominance with the fall of the Assad regime. Meanwhile, (and perhaps accordingly), Israel bolstered relations with Greece and Cyprus. While both countries affirmed their commitment to international law and Palestinian rights, they have also promoted security cooperation and arms trade with Israel.

10. ***Israel benefits from US cooperation, full security support and a political umbrella in international institutions, while sidelining US demands regarding an end to the war in Gaza, the promotion of a hostage deal, and easing the humanitarian crisis as it waits for Trump's comeback*** - The Biden administration continued to support Israel's security, the IDF and the US Central Command maintained close cooperation, with the US deploying deterrence forces and air defense systems, and forming an international coalition against Iranian attacks. The US adopted Israel's position regarding the decisions of the International Criminal Court. While pressing for improved humanitarian aid in the Gaza Strip, it refrained from taking a firm stance when Israel only partially complied, and failed to advance a hostage deal and an end to the war, as well as a plan for the "day after" in Gaza. Despite Biden's unprecedented support for Israel, members of the Israeli government openly supported Trump during the campaign and hailed his re-election.

11. ***The world distances itself from Israel and Israel distances itself from the world*** - Despite positive formal relations between Israel and many countries, faced challenges including a negative immigration balance, and its ranking in the global democracy indexes declined from a liberal democracy to an electoral democracy. The major credit rating agencies downgraded Israel's rating and issued a negative forecast for the state of the Israeli economy, which was reflected in a significant decline in foreign investment. Human rights organizations and international tribunals in The Hague condemned Israeli actions in Gaza and the Occupied Territories, and global efforts grew to locate and arrest Israeli soldiers abroad. The world's major airlines suspended services to Israel due to the security situation, and public institutions and groups increasingly called for an end to cooperation with the country. Activist campaigns advocating an arms embargo on Israel grew louder, while Israel's arms sales continue to flourish. The Israeli Foreign Ministry, weakened by declining influence, another ministerial change, and the resignation of key diplomats, chose to adopt a mostly aggressive and confrontational approach vis-à-vis governments critical of Israel.