

Conclusions and Recommendations

This study analyzed the potential existential threats facing Israel, their possible consequences, the security pillars that block them, and the internal and external processes that affect their level of severity. In the study, five existential threat scenarios were examined, of which three had a security/military nature: the formation of a regional coalition against Israel; nuclear proliferation in the Middle East; and the failure of the Israeli response to a combined precision missile attack led by Iran and its proxies. The two additional scenarios had a political/social nature: international isolation and boycott of Israel; and the disintegration of Israeli society and loss of the internal elements of its strength and of its Jewish and democratic identity.

The scenarios were analyzed through a variety of parameters: the current situation assessment of the threat, its potential severity, and possible causes that could accelerate or inhibit its materialization. Combining all the scenarios together enabled a wider picture: the joint security pillars that help thwart the different threat scenarios; the mutual connections between one threat and the rise of other accompanying threats; and the joint causes that influence the likelihood of the threats to emerge.

The analysis of the threat scenarios shows that Israel is not facing immediate existential threats at the current point in time; however, there are early signs of internal, regional, and international trends that could worsen in the future and increase the likelihood of these existential threats. The time frames for the materialization of these existential threats, whose sources are external, vary: while a missile attack could occur in the short term, the other external threats—the formation of a regional coalition, the nuclearization of the Middle East, and international isolation—could occur in medium- and long-term time frames. Meanwhile, the internal threat to Israel's Jewish and democratic identity could, under certain circumstances, develop in a short- or medium-term time frame.

The conclusions are as follows:

1. Israel is unlikely to face immediate external existential threats.

The time frame that may change this assessment differs from one threat to another. A regional military coalition that poses a severe-to-existential threat to Israel is not expected to arise in the foreseeable future, without large-scale changes to the regimes in the region, their military and economic capabilities, the motivations that guide them, and the regional role of the United States. In addition, Iran's nuclearization efforts are meant to be suspended and supervised according to the nuclear deal with the world powers (the JCPOA), which reduces the motivation for immediate military nuclearization among other states in the Middle East—as long as Iran does not completely renounce it. Therefore, the scenario of nuclear weapons in the hands of an enemy states and the development of a multipolar nuclear system in the region remains a medium- and long-term threat.

The collapse of Israel's defense systems following a combined precision attack using missiles and other means, led by Iran and its proxies, is a threat in the short and medium term. This threat could potentially cause severe damage to Israel, but in order for it to become an existential threat, an unusual combination of circumstances would have to take place—this is unlikely but it is possible—involving enemy successes and Israeli failures. International isolation of Israel could occur as a result of internal processes in US society and politics in the medium and long term and should Israel take unilateral and defiant steps in the conflict with the Palestinians, which the international community would see as contrary to international law and norms.

The study found that the likelihood of severe threats becoming existential threats generally requires several threats taking place at the same time, or a single threat that has consequences beyond its direct damage. The connections between the diverse security pillars at Israel's disposal create a situation in which a single threat scenario could increase the likelihood of other threat scenarios to materialize. This could result in a cumulative effect whose severity is existential. For example, the threat scenarios of soft powers—diplomatic, economic, and social—could erode Israel's strengths and the solidarity and deterrence images that it externally projects, possibly increasing the likelihood that adversaries will identify vulnerability and employ substantial military force and economic sanctions.

Furthermore, because of the mutual connections between Israel's security pillars, if one—such as the special relationship with the United States—suffers a serious blow, this could undermine other security pillars, including Israel's foreign relations, its internal resilience, technological superiority, and military capabilities. Similarly, a military-threat scenario whose direct consequences are not existential could create significant socioeconomic shock waves that magnify their severity. This refers to indirect consequences, such as distancing investors and companies from Israel, mass emigration from Israel, brain drain, loss of confidence in the government, and undermining the basic common denominator that unifies Israeli society.

2. A series of regional trends keep existential threats to Israel at bay and reduce their likelihood, at least in the short and medium terms.

These include the following trends: deep sectarian and ideological polarization between competing regional camps (Sunnis versus Shiites, pragmatists versus radicals—Iran and its proxies, Islamists, Salafi-jihadists); the weakening of radical forces in Arab states, from the Muslim Brotherhood to the Islamic State; the deepening of the strategic relations between Israel and pragmatic Arab regimes with whom it shares a similar orientation, including a close connection with the United States, shared regional interests related to the Iranian threat, the struggle against radical Islam and collaborations in the realms of economy, water, and energy; the focus of the public agenda in most Arab states on intense internal affairs—economic, health, and security—along with the declining importance of external affairs, including the Palestinian problem.

As long as these regional trends continue, it is unlikely that extreme events would reverse the existing situation, prompt Arab or Islamic military recruitment against Israel, and pose an existential threat to Israel. However, in the short and medium term, extreme events with potential to escalate could occur. These include damage to the holy places—especially the al-Aqsa mosque in Jerusalem—attributed to Jewish terrorists or to Israel; the mass killing of Palestinian/Arab civilians attributed to Jewish terrorists or to Israel; the mass expulsion of Palestinians from the West Bank to Jordan; unilateral Israeli annexation measures; a surprise attack by Iran and its proxies; and the fall of a pragmatic regime in a neighboring state and the rise of a hostile one in its place.

3. *Alongside the trends described, multidimensional processes are taking place—regional, international, and internal—that could increase the likelihood of existential threats emerging in the medium and long term.*

A. The instability that the Middle East has been experiencing since the end of 2010 continues to threaten pragmatic Arab regimes, which could find themselves coping with one or more of the following: challenges to the regime by Islamist forces that are hostile to Israel; the development of a serious economic crisis or severe shortage in resources that would disrupt the responsible political order in the region; the renewal of the nuclear arms race in the region if the nuclear agreement with Iran is cancelled or undermined—which would induce additional states in the region to pursue military nuclear programs, creating a volatile reality of a multipolar nuclear Middle East.

B. The ongoing improvement in the technological and military capabilities of Iran and its proxies, especially in the field of precision missiles, poses an increasing challenge to Israel when it comes to defending strategic targets, critical infrastructure, and population centers in the case of a combined precision attack.

C. The consensus of bipartisan American support for Israel is increasingly being undermined—a trend reflected in the declarations of American politicians, especially those identified with the Democratic Party. In addition, the rift between Israel and significant segments of American Jews, especially the younger generation, is deepening.

D. Lastly, the ongoing process of the erosion of democracy and civic equality threatens the cohesion of Israeli society.

Possible political transformations in the regional, international, and internal fronts should be seen as warning signs that existential threats could develop and that the time frames for their materialization have decreased. The simultaneous appearance of a number of transformations on several fronts, which, by themselves are not necessarily considered existential threats, could pose a multidimensional threat to Israel and could become an existential threat.

On the regional front, it is necessary to watch out for a possible regime change in Egypt and/or in Jordan and a rise of Islamist forces in their place that reject the peace agreements; Iran's return to the path of military

nuclearization and its decision to transition from a pattern of conflict via proxies to combined conflict—direct and indirect—with Israel; the weakening of the international mechanisms for preventing the proliferation of nuclear weapons; the radicalization of Turkey’s foreign policy (for example, its possible departure from NATO and joining the pro-Iranian camp), thus affecting its current character and transforming it from a status quo state into an enemy state. On the international front, it is necessary to be vigilant for an extreme change in the US position toward supplying weapons to Israel, maintaining Israel’s qualitative military edge, and supporting it in international forums; Israel’s expulsion from international umbrella organizations and its being boycotted by non-governmental organizations, international blocs, or states with significant economic power. On the internal front, it is necessary to be wary of processes that damage democratic institutions, the legal system, and freedom of expression; Israel’s unilateral annexation of territories in Judea and Samaria and formal inequality among Israel’s citizens.

4. Israel is facing an increasing threat to its democratic identity.

For some time now, governmental policies and public opinion trends have manifested internal processes that support the eroding of Israel’s democratic character and attempting to weaken supervisory and legal mechanisms and violate freedoms and civil equality. The escalation of these trends—by initiating additional steps in the government and in the Knesset—could severely harm Israel’s foundations as a Jewish and democratic state in the spirit of its Declaration of Independence.

Beyond their direct damage, these processes could have severe indirect consequences for Israel’s security. They could erode security pillars, harm Israeli social cohesion, and lead to the gradual weakening of Israel’s military, economic, and diplomatic strengths. In the medium and long term, these processes could even increase the likelihood of external-threat scenarios materializing and their potential damage. The challenge in thwarting the threat to Israel’s Jewish and democratic identity is that it is a slow, ongoing process, which gradually becomes more severe, making it difficult to identify when it will become a real existential threat.

Even though the existential threats discussed in this study will likely not materialize, and most of these threats develop slowly and gradually,

Israel must act in advance to prevent them. Furthermore, Israel has many possibilities for influencing the emergence of threats and consolidating diverse security pillars that will prevent them from becoming existential. Given the range of threats discussed in this study, the policy recommended requires maintaining the IDF's military advantages and strengthening its defense systems, but no less importantly—demonstrating diplomatic daring and initiative and cultivating “soft” powers centered on Israeli society that project onto its neighbors in the region and its friends around the world. These “soft” powers are based on Israel's regional and international standing, its economic and technological capabilities, its internal cohesion, and its democratic character. Along with the recommendations that are unique to each threat scenario and are noted in detail in the study's relevant chapters, this study offers the following general recommendations:

1. Israel must maintain its qualitative military edge and its deterrent image in the field of unconventional weapons, as they are the most basic guarantee of deterring its enemies and ensuring its existence.

Israel's military capabilities will enable it to take action to thwart severe threats in advance, defend against them if they materialize, and respond to them powerfully and effectively. These capabilities are especially important if several serious threat scenarios are to materialize at the same time, such as a combined precision-missile attack by Iran and its proxies, enemy states acquiring nuclear weapons, the creation of a multipolar nuclear system in the Middle East, and the formation of a regional coalition against Israel. Moreover, Israel's military power helps to advance regional alliances with forces that are interested in relying on Israel in the face of shared threats. It even contributes to strengthening the special relations with the United States, which knows that it will not have to send American troops to fight for Israel.

The practical implication of this recommendation is that Israel must continue to invest in defense affairs, especially in strengthening its abilities to defend against aerial threats of missiles, rockets, and unmanned aerial vehicles. In addition, it must invest in the cyber field. The response required of Israel does not only include strengthening active and passive defensive capabilities but also preparing the home front for serious emergency situations, along with developing capabilities that aim to disrupt the military buildup efforts of enemies. Israel must see the exercise of these capabilities as a central,

ongoing campaign that is capable of preventing war or, at least, preventing its intensity. Israel's success in maintaining its military and technological superiority over its neighbors is conditional upon taking developing quality human capital in the fields of science and technology through investments in education; investment in R&D and especially defense R&D; preventing the large-scale phenomena of quality manpower evading military service, and discouraging a brain drain from Israel.

2. Israel must reinforce its special relations with the United States.

These relations contribute to shaping Israel's regional and international standing, building up its military capabilities, and maintaining its qualitative edge. In addition, these relations help encourage settlement of conflicts between it and its neighbors and deter regional and international forces from pursuing conflict with Israel. They are a vital component of any strategy for preventing the formation of a regional coalition against Israel, limiting the proliferation of nuclear weapons in the Middle East, and thwarting international initiatives to isolate Israel. In order to maintain the advantages that stem from the special relations with the United States, Israel must work to restore the bipartisan consensus surrounding support for it and strengthen the connection between it and American Jewry. At the same time, Israel must monitor the stability of the American security pillar and, if necessary, examine ways that it can gradually reduce its dependence on the United States by weakening the mutual connections between the two in terms of military, diplomatic, and economic capabilities and by basing relations with its neighbors on bilateral and regional foundations that will be durable even if the US traditional policy toward Israel changes. Furthermore, Israel must work to diversify support bases by developing parallel complementary relations with additional world powers, although none of them could fully replace the loss of American support.

3. Israel must strive to achieve a stable diplomatic settlement with the Palestinians within secure, negotiated borders or, at least, pave the way for such and respond to regional and international peace initiatives in a way that serves these objectives.

Advancing a settlement with the Palestinians is a key variable that has the power to reduce the severity of most of Israel's external and internal threat

scenarios, which could potentially become existential threats. In the regional sphere, a settlement would help deepen the roots of peace between Israel and its neighbors and make it easier to create a positive dynamic of governmental and civilian partnership among the states and peoples in the region based on shared interests. Furthermore, while it would not resolve all of the existing tensions in the Middle East, it would likely help inhibit negative regional processes by weakening radical forces and by reducing the likelihood (which is low in any case) of regional unification against Israel following extreme scenarios. In the international sphere, striving for a settlement with the Palestinians—whether it succeeds or not—would likely strengthen Israel’s image in the global arena as a state striving for peace. This image would hinder attempts to pressure Israel through boycott, isolation, and sanctions. Possible steps that would demonstrate that Israel seeks a settlement include expressing a commitment to the two-state solution; freezing construction in isolated settlements; and enabling the establishment of new towns in the Palestinian Authority. In the internal sphere, a stable permanent settlement of the conflict with the Palestinians could help Israel maintain its unique character as a Jewish and democratic state, prevent it from deteriorating into an inegalitarian one state between the Mediterranean Sea and the Jordan River, and alleviate some of the internal tensions within Israeli society.

4. Israel must strive to shape a regional environment characterized by stability, security, cooperation, and relations of trust and mutual dependence with its neighbors.

Deepening and diversifying Israel’s peaceful and cooperative relations with its neighbors—beyond the military and diplomatic spheres—would increase their stability and reduce their dependence on the shared Iranian threat and the US policy in the region. Increasing mutual trust between Israel and Arab states would even make it easier to institute regional security mechanisms against extreme events such as damage to the holy places in Jerusalem. These steps could reduce the danger of the formation of a regional coalition against Israel and would likely make it easier to cope with regional threats such as nuclear proliferation and hostilities by Iran and its proxies. To this end, Israel must deepen its strategic relations with Egypt, Jordan, and the Gulf States and enhance its value with states in the region in diverse areas, including security, energy, water, the environment, health, agriculture,

and science. Israel should provide the region's states with technological, environmental, and economic inputs and allocate designated funding that aims to advance shared regional projects and increase the value of peace with Israel among the region's governments and nations.

5. *Israel must cultivate its unique identity—as a Jewish and democratic state—in the spirit of the Declaration of Independence.*

This identity is a cornerstone of Israel's existence, and it contributes to strengthening the cohesion of Israeli society and the resilience of the civilian home front in times of emergency, in the face of severe threat scenarios. It is also a critical component of ensuring Israel's economic and technological strengths, consolidating its international standing, reinforcing its strategic relations with the United States, and strengthening identification with Israel among the Jewish diaspora in the West. In order to maintain this identity, the Israeli government must work intensively to instill and imbue democratic values among the public and refrain from actions that hurt democracy, such as undermining democratic institutions, advancing laws that discriminate against minority groups, and taking steps toward unilateral annexation of Judea and Samaria, which could create or perpetuate a reality of inequality among its citizens.

6. *Israel must establish a situation-assessment body.*

The methodological challenge involved in predicting future threat scenarios is great, given their complexity and the elements of uncertainty involved. Consequently, it is important to establish a permanent body that could be called "Israel 2050," whose purpose would be to conduct periodic situation assessments that aim to identify and indicate possible warnings signs of severe threats that develop in different time frames, foresee unpredictable extreme events, and develop preventive and preparatory steps for them, while integrating all of Israel's national strengths and powers—both hard and soft.

Finally, it should be emphasized that Israel is not a passive actor given the threat scenarios discussed; rather, it is a state replete with hard and soft powers that is capable of shaping its own reality and keeping at bay the threats that it faces. Its actions can impede or expedite internal and external processes and can positively or negatively influence its regional and international standing. The severity of the existential threats discussed

in this study, their likelihood, and the effectiveness of the security pillars that prevent them first and foremost result from Israel's defense doctrine, its foreign policy, its national priorities, and the way that Israel allocates its national resources. These are all determined by the relevant authorities in Israel. Warding off these threats depends on Israel's success at making the most of the internal and external sources of power at its disposal. Furthermore, Israel must maximize the benefits of its relations with leading international players—especially the United States, the European Union, Russia, and China—and with pragmatic Arab states that have shared interests with it, especially Egypt, Jordan, and the Gulf States.

Identifying and assessing existential threats is of the utmost importance to Israel's security, welfare, and future. At the same time, Israel's governing systems and general public must also give proper attention to Israel's opportunities. Israel must refrain from a situation in which constant anxiety of existential threats comes at the expense of being able to have a balanced assessment of the reality and creates paralyzing fear that prevents it from taking calculated risks and making rational decisions. Israel must, therefore, also seek out positive trends that deter existential threats, identify transformations that contain chances and opportunities, and strive to shape an internal, regional, and international reality that provides it with stable security and improves its ability to successfully cope with the ongoing challenges that it faces.