

International Isolation and Boycott of Israel

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Israel's foreign relations are a crucial pillar of its defense and a significant tool in blocking and reducing potential threats. Israel's special relations with the United States, its connection with world Jewry, and its efforts to achieve peace have helped to maintain its international support and to fight against attempts to boycott it. Israel's strategic relations with the Arab states reflect its value as a regional stabilizing force. Israel's special relations with states in Europe, Asia, Latin America, and Africa are also a significant part of developing its military, diplomatic, and economic capabilities. Therefore, if Israel were to face international isolation and sanctions, this would be a dangerous scenario that would likely weaken it, making it difficult for Israel to protect its essential strategic interests. An extreme scenario—in which an effective international boycott against Israel and international isolation would be accompanied by other military threats or lead to them—could even pose an existential threat to Israel.

An analysis of the various possible scenarios of international isolation indicates in the short term—the next five years—and perhaps even beyond, that the international arena, whether diplomatic, economic, or military, does not pose a serious threat to Israel. Despite the prevailing harsh criticism of Israel's policy toward the Palestinians and the Palestinian offensive on the international front—both diplomatic and civil—it would be difficult to define these as “existential threats.” Key regional players are currently preoccupied and will continue to be in the coming years with closer-to-home challenges, several of which can be defined as “existential” for them. The oil states in the Gulf, for example, which in the past imposed an oil embargo on the West

out of considerations connected to the conflict with Israel, have refrained from applying this means of pressure during the past four decades.

At the same time, two essential assets in Israel's foreign relations are increasingly challenged in the medium and long term. One is the special relationship between Israel and the United States; the other is the internal cohesion of American Jews and their relationship with Israel. Israel's national security could be undermined should the positions of the US administration and of American Jews toward Israel shift to the extreme against the backdrop of processes whose beginnings are already evident in American politics and society. This chapter examines the potential threats that arise from these scenarios in terms of diplomatic and economic risks, the sources of the risks, and the time frame.

Situation Assessment: The Map of Threats Toward Israel in the International Arena

The strategic alliance with the United States is Israel's most important foreign relations asset. It has provided Israel with a qualitative military edge, economic resilience, and an international diplomatic umbrella, among other things. As part of the historic relationship between the two countries, the United States has sold advanced weapons to Israel for decades, has provided it with generous economic aid before Israel had achieved economic stability, and has blocked—sometimes using its veto power—draft resolutions against Israel at the UN Security Council and in other international organizations. Consequently, the most significant threat facing Israel is if the positions of the US administration and in the Congress toward Israel were to change. Israel's international standing could be harmed if the United States no longer blocked resolutions against it in the relevant forums, ceased to provide weapons, and no longer maintained Israel's qualitative military edge over other states in the region.

Changing trends in the US position

The demographic structure of the United States is constantly changing, especially due to the immigration of millions of people from Latin America and their increasing weight in the American political system. The attitude of Latin American immigrants toward Israel in general and toward the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in particular differs from that of other segments

of American society, in part due to having less awareness of the history of the Jewish people, Israel-US relations, and American foreign policy issues that extend beyond the context of Latin America and North America. In 2018, representatives of Latino origin, as well as two Muslim women, who disapprove of various aspects of Israel's policy were elected to the House of Representatives. Democratic presidential candidates have in the past been critical of Israel's policies—currently even more so—and on several occasions, arguments have taken place over the Democratic Party's platform regarding issues relating to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, such as the status of Jerusalem and the recognition of Israeli sovereignty on the Golan Heights.

Israel's policy during the current tenure of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu (since 2009) also has contributed to strengthening the above-mentioned trends. Paradoxically, this period of enhanced relations between the Israeli and US governments also reflects an increasing challenge in maintaining bipartisan political and public support for Israel, which, until the last few years, served as a central pillar in the relations between the two countries. The way the Israeli government and its leader managed the struggle against the Iranian nuclear deal in the American Congress—in bypassing President Obama—prompted protest in the Democratic Party and undermined one of the foundations of US foreign policy toward Israel: bipartisan support for Israel in the US Congress and the American public. Statements, actions, and legislation by Israel that even some Israeli observers perceived as anti-democratic were also met with criticism in the United States. For example, Beto O'Rourke, a former Democratic member of the House of Representatives and a former candidate in the Democratic party's presidential race called Netanyahu a "racist prime minister" for his statements on Israel's election day in 2015 ("Arab voters are heading to the polling stations in droves") and for his efforts to include the Otzma Yehudit party within the list of the Union of Right-Wing Parties.¹

The current US president, Donald Trump, has deepened the rift between the two political poles in the United States, and Israel has been drawn into this inter-party struggle against its best interests. Steps taken by President Trump, such as moving the US embassy to West Jerusalem, ending US funding of UNRWA, and recognizing Israel's sovereignty over the Golan Heights, were not received favorably by some of the Democratic representatives in Congress. Creating a situation in which only one political party in the

United States supports Israel could come back to haunt Israel after Trump's departure, if a Democratic administration that is less friendly to Israel and less committed to it is elected.

In the American Jewish community too, worrying changes are taking place. Intermarriage has distanced generations of young people from the organized Jewish community and from having an interest in Israel. The Israeli government's conduct on issues of religion and state, such as conversion or women's prayer at the Western Wall, do not sufficiently take into account the attitudes of diaspora Jewry and has led to indignation among the non-Orthodox segments of the American Jewish community, of which 70 percent can be considered liberal-democratic. The result has been a crisis between the majority of American Jewry and Israel. In addition, because of the erosion of Israel's traditional image—as a pluralistic, democratic state striving for peace—and because of Israel's close relations with the Trump administration and the evangelical community, Israel has become a polarizing issue among American Jews,² although this trend mainly characterizes the younger generation.³ The distancing of the two largest communities of the Jewish people, in Israel and the United States, is one of the most serious strategic threats hanging over Israel. The involvement of American Jews in US politics and their influence are much greater than their demographic weight. Should the rift increase and cause the relationship between American Jews and Israel to deteriorate even further, the US administration's support of the State of Israel can be expected to wane.

It is important to note that Israel's relations with “traditional” world powers, such as Russia and the European Union, and with rising world powers, such as China and India, and even with the pragmatic Arab states, such as Egypt, Jordan, and the United Arab Emirates, rely, in part, on Israel's relations with the United States. The leaders of these countries perceive American Jews as having political power and clout and having an ability to influence the US administration on diplomatic issues that are directly and indirectly related to Israel as well as to the interests of these states and their relations with the United States.

In terms of the time frame, already in the 2020 American presidential elections, it is reasonably possible that a president with an Obama-style liberal agenda will be elected. In this scenario, given the support that still exists for Israel among large segments of the American Jewish community, the

American public in general, and in Congress, any challenges to supporting Israel most likely will cause friction similar to that which characterized Obama's presidency. The change is unlikely to be sudden but rather could occur in stages, during which early warnings and the responses of relevant communities in the United States would be examined. Deeper changes—if they indeed take place—are likely to emerge over the course of two or more decades, during which another generation of minorities—voters and elected officials—will increase and contribute to the alienation between the different generations within the American Jewish community and between the community and Israel. Even then, the assumption is that an extreme change in the position of the United States would not take place immediately.

Concrete threats that could arise in the relations with the United States

Changing trends in Washington's position toward Israel could be translated into concrete steps, from which threats could emerge. In the past, the United States has applied sanctions against Israel, such as suspending the provision of military equipment or preventing financial and diplomatic aid, but not at a level that could be defined as an "existential threat." For example, this occurred in 1975, when the United States announced that it was reassessing its relations with Israel in order to accelerate Israel's partial withdrawal from Sinai as part of an interim agreement between Israel and Egypt brokered by the United States. This reassessment included freezing weapons deliveries from the United States to Israel and removing the American "diplomatic umbrella" from Israel. Another example was in the 1980s, when President Ronald Reagan prohibited the sale of cluster bombs to Israel for six years because a congressional commission of inquiry concluded that Israel had improperly used them during the First Lebanon War.

Previous US administrations have also applied economic sanctions against Israel. In 1957, President Eisenhower threatened to stop the transfer of financial contributions from American Jews to Israel if the latter did not withdraw from Sinai.⁴ During 1991–1992, President George H.W. Bush denied the provision of guarantees for loans that the Israeli government had sought to receive in order to absorb the Russian immigration. This denial was due to the refusal of the then prime minister, Yitzhak Shamir, to stop construction in the settlements. In 2000, the US Congress threatened to

cut military aid to Israel if the Phalcon deal (sale of intelligence-gathering planes) with China was not cancelled.

Unlike these past examples, when partial and short-lived sanctions were imposed, a total cessation of the supply of weapons from the United States would undoubtedly pose an existential threat to Israel. Israel would have difficulty finding an alternative supply source and this move would affect Israel's standing in the region and its ability to deter various regional players. Both the US administration, which decides on the supply and on funding by virtue of the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on military aid, and the US Congress, which backs up the administration's decisions with legislation, could decide to stop supplying weapons—whether partial or complete. This means that the existential threat could be realized if only one of the branches of government wishes to do so. Even if the Congress supports the continued provision of weapons and adopts legislation on this issue especially the one relating to budgeting the weapons transfers, it would find it hard to enforce the branches of the American administration to implement the MoU with the absence of a presidential instruction.

Another concrete existential military threat relates to the degree to which the United States is determined to prevent actors hostile to Israel from acquiring nuclear weapons, whether by purchase or development. When Israel attacked nuclear weapons production facilities in Iraq and in Syria, the US response was passive, partly because the attack did not result in a chain reaction and certainly not one that damaged the interests of the United States. A similar development in the future that harms the United States and its interests could lead to an American response with severe or even existential consequences for Israel.

Should the US administration change its policy toward Israel's own nuclear program, Israel could face possible complications if it takes action against the nuclear activity of adversarial actors. Thus far, the US administration has prevented any decisions against Israel in relevant international organizations in which the United States has influence. A change in the US position on this issue could create a process in which Israel's nuclear posture real or perceived—serving as an anchor of security and protecting against potential existential threats—is jeopardized.

Another potential existential threat that could emerge from a change in US diplomatic policy relates to the Security Council resolutions, especially

those based on Chapter 7 of the UN Charter. The articles of this chapter provide the Security Council with various measures for addressing threats to peace and security in the world. Since 1967, the United States has prevented the Security Council from adopting resolutions that could cause severe damage to Israel, especially those draft resolutions based on Chapter 7 of the UN Charter. In the cases where the United States has strayed from this policy—such as its abstention from voting on Security Council Resolution 2334 (on December 23, 2016), which denies the legality of the West Bank settlements and restates the opposition to unilateral changes to the June 4, 1967 borders, they were not related to Chapter 7.

It should be noted that the US Congress does not have the ability to prevent the president from ordering or cancelling a vote at the UN; in other words, if a situation develops in which the president orders a vote at the Security Council based on Chapter 7 of the UN Charter, even the most friendly Congress toward Israel will not be able to block this.

Economic threats

Economic sanctions are a severe threat that, if carried out, could endanger the foundations of Israel's security and even could become an existential threat if they are accompanied by military and diplomatic threats. Economic sanctions are defined as measures of economic pressure or punishment. They are imposed on a state in order to cause a change in policy or, at the very minimum, to demonstrate that the state imposing the sanctions disagrees with the policy of the state upon which the sanctions are imposed. Economic sanctions can include prohibiting trade (exports and imports) with the punished state; preventing foreign aid, loans, and investments; and seizing foreign assets and monetary transfers. Effective economic sanctions—to the point of undermining the stability of the state subjected to the sanctions—necessitates that the states imposing the sanctions be much stronger and wealthier than the states that are penalized. As the experience of the past reveals, political objectives are not easily achieved with economic sanctions, given the difficulty in causing significant economic damage, enlisting partners to join in the sanctions, and enforcing an effective boycott.⁵

Israel could suffer negative consequences from a global economic boycott, sanctions by international organizations, or a deterioration into a North Korea or South Africa-type situation. These measures could seriously harm

Israel's trade, especially the import of essential products such as food. They could become even threatening if Israel's membership also is revoked from international organizations such as the International Civil Aviation Organization—making it difficult to fly to and from Israel. In addition to the possible damage to trade, this move would critically damage the tourism industry, which is a significant source of income for Israel.

Today, the boycott by nongovernmental political and/or economic organizations forms the main economic threat to Israel. The past decade has seen the rise of a civil protest movement known as BDS (Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions), which focuses on Israel's actions in the territories, especially on the establishment of Israeli settlements and on the harm caused to the Palestinian population. Those who support BDS call to avoid purchasing Israeli products, especially those produced in the settlements, and from investing in Israeli companies. The impact of the actions of the BDS movement so far has been minimal and is not expected to cause any significant damage in the foreseeable future, in part because the EU countries, which are the major destinations of Israel's exports, have not yet adopted formal decisions by the European Commission to mark Israeli products as originating from the settlements.⁶ Furthermore, at this stage, international organizations or blocs of countries, such as the European Union, are not attempting to adopt decisions to refrain from trading with Israel. In the absence of such initiatives, Israel does not face a severe threat, let alone an existential one. In addition, any progress toward international sanctions against Israel presumably would be gradual and initially directed toward the settlements, and would only intensify if the United States formally joins them.

As for the time frame for the materialization of this threat, without a dramatic change in the positions of the member states of large international organizations such as the OECD, the development of an existential threat is not anticipated. This reality is not expected to change in the short term. A process in which the United States also changes its trade relations with Israel—if it is even realized—is likely to take even longer. However, initial steps toward imposing a boycott on exports from the settlements and a refusal to do business with Israeli economic bodies, such as banks, operating in the settlements, have already been taken by the European Union, and these actions will accelerate if Israel moves toward annexation of Judea and Samaria—even if it is only partially annexed.

Significant harm to diplomatic and economic relations with China and Russia

A weakening of Israel's diplomatic and economic relations with China and Russia, especially if the US support for Israel has diminished and if the international criticism of Israel has intensified, could cause the two countries to minimize or even eliminate their opposition to providing weapons to Israel's potential adversaries. Given that China and Russia's dependence on the United States is negligible the United States has very limited influence on their decisions regarding Israel. Nonetheless, a severe confrontation between Israel and China or Russia, which would have existential consequences for Israel, is not anticipated in the foreseeable future.

Causes and Catalysts of Threats

Several factors could accelerate severe to existential threats in the international arena. First, legislative proceedings preparing for the annexation of Judea and Samaria would increase international criticism and cause relevant international institutions to adopt measures against Israel. These could cause severe harm to Israel. Anti-Israeli resolutions adopted by economic organizations in which the United States does not have a veto power could have harsh and even existential economic consequences. These include trade organizations or international financial institutions, as well as bodies such as the International Civil Aviation Organization. A reduction or complete cessation of international flights to Israel could have destructive consequences for Israel's economy. While there are no examples of insolvent states who have ceased to exist because of their economic situation, in Israel's geo-strategic situation, the combination of possible threats from sub-state terrorism and diplomatic-economic isolation could—in extreme scenarios—create a real existential threat.

Second, the effect of continued Israeli construction in Judea and Samaria is slower than the expected effect of legislative proceedings in preparation for annexing the territories. Nonetheless, the publication of plans and tenders for building new communities or massive construction in existing communities—especially if these plans involve land appropriation—would strengthen and intensify the criticism of Israel.

Third, sweeping, continued Israeli rejection of diplomatic initiatives that are accepted by the United States could lead to punitive measures. The US

administration tried to coerce Israel in the past when it refused to accept American peace plans, such as the Reagan Plan in 1982. Should the US administration present an initiative that is accepted by the Palestinians, the pro-American Arab states, and the Quartet (the United States, Russia, the UN, and the European Union)—and Israel is perceived as the only party preventing its implementation—the US administration could express its dissatisfaction with Israel and could encourage international players to take decisions that could significantly harm Israel.

Fourth, continued legislation that discriminates against minorities in Israel could affect Israel's international standing. Thus far, there have not been any harmful measures that threaten Israel's international standing in response to the Knesset's adoption of the Nation-State Law. Nevertheless, continuing this trend, combined with other actions, especially in Judea and Samaria, could cast a shadow over Israel's relations with the European Union and further erode Israel's relations with the US Jewish community.

Fifth, shifting policies regarding the provision of conventional and unconventional weapons by various suppliers could harm Israel. This is possible, for example, should the leaderships of China and Russia change or if the reasons preventing the provision of equipment and technologies to actors hostile to Israel cease to be valid. Possible changes include American indifference to such sales, the decline of Israel's influence among the possible sellers, and the weakening of nuclear conventions and the international regimes on this issue.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The undermining of Israel's relations with the United States is the main factor that could cause serious or even existential threats to Israel in the various diplomatic and economic arenas. Preventing these threats requires Israel to maintain the support of the US administration and of the two houses of Congress at all costs, and to relate to the United States as the cornerstone of Israel's preservation and in developing the ability to block and reduce any such threats.

Recommendations

First, restoring bipartisan American support for Israel is imperative as it is an extremely necessary political condition. The prime minister of Israel can

advance this objective and stop the process by which Israel is becoming identified with only one political party in the United States by strengthening connections with rising leaders in both the Democratic and Republican parties; rebuilding the connections with the leadership of the two parties in both houses of Congress; renewing and deepening the connection with congressional forums of ethnic minorities and in geographic areas with large minority populations; and by refraining from interfering in intra-American politics by openly supporting one candidate or another in the US presidential elections.

Second, rehabilitating and reinvigorating the connection between Israel and the US Jewish community is essential, while being understanding of the processes taking place in this community. The measures that can halt, at least in part, the erosion of Israel's relations with the large segment of non-Orthodox American Jews include Israel's refraining from any governmental, legislative, or advocacy measures that indicate a desire to annex parts of Judea and Samaria; stopping settlement construction, especially beyond the security fence; acknowledgment by political and sectoral leaders and public figures of understanding the needs and opinions of diaspora Jews on issues such as women's prayer at the Western Wall; cancelling the Nation-State Law or substantially changing it and refraining from measures abrogating the full and equal rights of the non-Jewish population in Israel; establishing a large-scale national program to strengthen Israel-diaspora relations with the participation of as many bodies and groups as possible, including state institutions and apparatuses (the president, the Knesset and the Israeli government), public and sectoral leaderships, Israeli civil society organizations, national institutions (especially the Jewish Agency), leaderships of the diaspora Jewish communities in addition to their main organizations, wealthy and influential; establishing a central coordinating and advisory body that would address the concerns of diaspora Jews and represent them in decision-making processes, and not only those related directly to diaspora Jewry.

Finally, cooperating with reasonable diplomatic initiatives is imperative. Although Israel's previous rejections of diplomatic initiatives proffered by international bodies to advance the peace process with the Palestinians did not significantly harm Israel—either because the Palestinians rejected them or due to other issues and circumstances that had preoccupied the international community—Israel must fight the image of being a spoiler of any peace

proposal or process. This perception could, along with other factors, cause processes of isolation and sanctions that would be extremely damaging to Israel. Therefore, Israel must look for positive aspects in peace plans and formulate its responses to them accordingly.

Notes

- 1 “U.S. Presidential Candidate: ‘Netanyahu – A Racist Prime Minister,’” *Ynet*, April 8, 2019, <https://bit.ly/2uTEAup> [Hebrew].
- 2 See, for example, Shlomo Fischer, *2018 Annual Assessment of the Situation and Dynamics of the Jewish People*, 13, <https://bit.ly/2TJOmL7>.
- 3 A Pew Research Center survey conducted in 2013 shows that the younger generation has a tendency to demonstrate less support and concern for Israel. This tendency has become an integral part of their Jewish identity and the way they define their Jewishness. See <https://pewrsr.ch/2KH9bUQ>.
- 4 “Eisenhower Reveals His 1957 Aims to Penalize Israel on Sinai Issue,” *Jewish Telegraphic Agency*, September 22, 1965, <https://bit.ly/2VZQJuE>.
- 5 Eli Avidar, *The Abyss* (Agam, 2011), 129–136 [Hebrew].
- 6 Eran Yashiv, Nizan Feldman, and Oded Eran, “The EU Decision to Indicate the Origin of Products from the Settlements,” *INSS Insight* no. 769, November 19, 2015, <https://www.inss.org.il/publication/the-eu-decision-to-indicate-the-origin-of-products-from-the-settlements/>.