

Executive Summary

Over the seventy years of its existence, the State of Israel has succeeded in developing impressive military, economic, and diplomatic strengths; it has become an undeniable fact on the regional and global map and many of its neighbors have recognized it de facto. Yet despite its impressive achievements, Israel still continues to cope with security challenges, including dealing with enemies who call for—and possibly even seek—its destruction. This study provides a contemporary analysis of the severe potential threat scenarios that could endanger the physical existence of the State of Israel, the functioning of its essential systems, and its unique identity of being a Jewish and democratic state.

In this study, five threat scenarios were examined. Three scenarios involve military threats, and they are the formation of a regional military coalition against Israel; nuclear proliferation in the Middle East; and the collapse of Israeli defense systems due to a massive, combined precision-missile attack led by Iran and its proxies. The other two threat scenarios are diplomatic and social threats, and they are international isolation and the boycott of Israel; and the disintegration of Israeli society, leading to the loss of its social cohesion and its identity as a Jewish and democratic state. In each scenario, the study examined possible threat causes; accelerating and inhibiting factors; secondary threats that accompany the main threats; and security pillars for providing a comprehensive military, diplomatic, and economic response to the threat scenarios and preventing them from materializing.

In the introduction, we discuss the theoretical definitions of the concept “existential threat,” examining the possible gap between the perception of the threat and its reality and presenting the methodological limitations involved in studying extreme future scenarios. For the purpose of the study, we defined the concept “existential threat” as clearly having the potential to cause real damage to the state’s ability to successfully cope with external

and internal dangers. Such a threat, therefore, is one that endangers the very existence, sovereignty, and agreed-upon identity of the state. This threat relates to three main levels: at the physical level, the harm to the State of Israel would be critical, from which it is impossible to recover and return to normal functioning; at the level of sovereignty, the state would lose control of its institutions, its population, and its resources; and at the level of identity, the state would experience the loss of its character as a Jewish and democratic entity that enables Israel to serve as the nation-state of the Jewish people.

The first chapter is dedicated to the basic threat of a regional coalition that has the motivation and ability to pose an existential threat to Israel. Its conclusion is that this scenario is unlikely in the foreseeable future given the regional circumstances, including political, ethnic, and ideological divisions; lack of sufficient military power; decline in the impact of the Palestinian issue on the regional and international dynamic; and warming relations between Israel and the Arab states that have shared interests with Israel and close relations with the United States.

Despite the improbable likelihood of this threat scenario, Israel must keep track of possible strategic turning points that could—in the future—renew the threat of a regional coalition. In addition, Israel should take a series of steps to maintain and strengthen the security pillars protecting it from this threat; namely, Israel should strengthen its relations with pragmatic regional regimes and support—within the limits of its ability—their stability through diplomatic, economic, and military means; improve its image among the Arab states by advancing a diplomatic process with the Palestinians; deepen the roots of peace through multidisciplinary cooperation, highlighting Israel's value to the region; and protect Muslim and Christian holy sites, especially the al-Aqsa compound, as its damage could lead to large-scale outbreaks of rage and serve as a catalyst—in combination with additional processes—for the creation of a regional coalition against Israel.

The second chapter focuses on the consequences of multipolar nuclearization in the Middle East and finds that this scenario could occur in the medium and long term, especially if and when Iran moves forward with its nuclear program, including its military aspects. Meanwhile, an opposite dynamic in which nuclear efforts—civilian and military—in Arab states also could contribute to increasing Iran's nuclear motivations. Israel faces a number

of challenges vis-à-vis the proliferation of nuclear weapons in the region, including the loss of its image as having the nuclear monopoly in the Middle East; the attainment of nuclear weapons by unstable regimes, radical regimes that are hostile to Israel, and/or terrorist groups; the development of an unstable regional nuclear system that could deteriorate into nuclear crises, including with Israel's involvement; and coping with the nuclearization of pragmatic and pro-Western Arab states.

Along with the continued effort to prevent or delay the Iranian nuclear project, Israel should formulate a strategy to thwart the development of a multipolar nuclear system in the Middle East, which would include encouraging the United States to provide guarantees to states that are concerned about the Iranian nuclear program, in order to reduce their incentive to develop independent military nuclear capabilities. Israel should serve as a strategic hinterland to pragmatic Arab states that feel threatened by Iran; it should pursue non-kinetic efforts to prevent regional military nuclearization with the help of the United States and the international community, by encouraging civilian nuclear programs under considerable supervision, which would prevent the development of a military dimension, in addition to implementing sanctions and using intelligence and cyber measures.

The third chapter discusses the scenario of a failed Israeli response to a large-scale precision-missile attack targeting the home front, which includes unmanned aerial attack vehicles and cyberattacks to paralyze the defense systems and the state's functioning. The main hostile entity that is capable of initiating this course of action is Iran, together with its regional proxies and allies. Among the external military threats examined in this study, this is the most immediate, concrete, and likely threat currently facing Israel. This kind of attack could, under extreme circumstances, severely harm both the ability of the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) to realize its military strength as well as the state's infrastructure and its functional continuity. Technological developments among Israel's enemies (especially in the field of precision missiles) increase the threat, as well as the need of Israeli air defense system to cope with a large number of missile launches from several arenas. Potential aggregate damage also further exacerbates this threat.

Coping with this threat requires developing a multidisciplinary Israeli response. In the military sphere—Israel should develop and implement an integrated defense doctrine that fully utilizes the various technological

systems that can intercept all kinds of threats while calculating the possible risks of responses to proactive offensive actions against the enemies' military buildup; in the military-diplomatic sphere—Israel should maintain the special relationship with the United States, which provides Israel with power and deterrence in the region; and at the home front, Israel should develop the ability to cope with mass casualty events.

The fourth chapter addresses a scenario in which Israel finds itself isolated after being subjected to an international boycott and sanctions. Despite the international criticism of Israel's policy on the Palestinian issue, this threat is unlikely to materialize in the short term. Unilateral annexation steps in the West Bank, ongoing rejection by Israel of international peace initiatives, or legislative steps that lead to the disintegration of the state's democratic identity, and distancing it from its allies in the West could increase this scenario's likelihood. In addition, an extreme change in the US position toward Israel could harm its international standing, the developments and processes of which are already evident in American politics.

Since the undermining of relations with the United States could lead to Israel's isolation in the international arena, Jerusalem must deepen its alliance with Washington by increasing Israel's value for the United States, given their shared regional challenges. Israel must maintain its liberal-democratic character by refraining from legal and political steps that violate the equal rights of its non-Jewish population; restore bipartisan support for Israel; strengthen its connections with representatives of ethnic minorities in the American Congress; refrain from supporting one candidate or another in the US presidential elections; be receptive to reasonable American diplomatic initiatives for advancing the peace process with the Palestinians; refrain from unilateral actions that could violate the status quo between Israel and the Palestinians and could indicate intent to annex parts of Judea and Samaria; and improve the connection between Israel and the American Jewish community.

The fifth chapter examines the threat posed to Israel by internal processes that may undermine fundamental elements of its Jewish and democratic identity. These processes could have direct, harmful consequences on Israel's liberal-democratic character and should be seen as an existential threat to the state's identity. In addition, these processes also have indirect consequences that would undermine Israel's security pillars. Changing the

character of the state, or a situation in which large-scale ethnic or ideological civil insurrection erupts could lead to the emigration of people who do not identify with the values of the state or feel threatened by it. A brain drain and distancing investors and tourists could cause severe economic damage to the state. Furthermore, these trends, if they materialize, would likely harm Israel's international standing in the West and deepen the rift between it and the Jewish diaspora.

Maintaining Israel's democratic identity necessitates measures in different spheres. In the legal sphere, the government must refrain from harming the institutions that are responsible for protecting democracy, ensuring civil equality, and for respecting minority rights, while it should strive to cultivate an education toward democratic values. In the diplomatic sphere, Israel must work to find a solution that ends or reduces its control over the Palestinians, and Israel must refrain from implementing policy that prevents reaching a future settlement on separation. As for its Jewish identity, Israel must maintain an effective Jewish majority by refraining from annexation and provision of citizenship to Palestinian residents on a large scale and by strengthening its connection with the Jewish diaspora.

The final chapter concludes that the State of Israel does not face immediate external existential threats. However, a series of internal, regional, and international processes could erode and undermine Israel's security pillars. These processes could negatively affect the balance of power between Israel and state and non-state actors in its regional arena and increase the likelihood of potential existential threats materializing in the future. These processes could—in certain scenarios—endanger security pillars that are vital to Israel and could pose a new threat map. While during the first three decades of Israel's existence, the main threat was the states in the first circle of the conflict and their armies, and later on the regional actors in the second and third circles that sought to advance military nuclear programs, followed by the buildup of terrorist armies on Israel's borders, today Israel must also consider additional threats. These include hostile non-state actors, most of them Iran's proxies, that have more precise and more lethal military capabilities than in the past; the possible weakening of the mainstay of American support, especially bipartisan backing for Israel; and fears of the disintegration of Israel's democratic character, the undermining of its

internal cohesion, and the deepening of the rift that has emerged with Jews in the United States.

These threat scenarios discussed here are subject to processes, most of which have not yet come to fruition; thus it is still possible and necessary to find adequate responses to help prevent them. This study recommends formulating a current national security doctrine that integrates hard military measures with soft diplomatic and economic ones to address the potential existential threats and to make strengthening Israel's security pillars—that is, maintaining Israel's relative military edge and its image of nuclear deterrence—the highest national priority; reinforcing the special relations with the United States; striving for a stable diplomatic settlement with the Palestinians; strengthening and developing cooperative governmental and civilian relations with Arab states, especially those belonging to the pragmatic pro-American axis—Egypt, Jordan, and the Gulf States; investing in the security of the home front and in improving its defense; training and maintaining high-level, skilled human capital in the fields of science and technology; strengthening Israel's international standing; and maintaining Israel's Jewish and democratic identity in the spirit of its Declaration of Independence.

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