

# Existential Threat Scenarios to the State of Israel

Ofir Winter, Editor



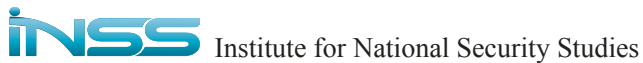
Memorandum

203



# **Existential Threat Scenarios to the State of Israel**

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# Existential Threat Scenarios to the State of Israel

Ofir Winter, Editor

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Memorandum No. 203

September 2020

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**כי לא לעולם חוסן:  
תרחישי איום קיומיים על מדינת ישראל**

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## Executive Summary

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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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Ofir Winter, Editor  
June, 2020

# Introduction

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## Ofir Winter, Kobi Michael, and Assaf Shiloah

The saying “in every generation they rise up against us to destroy us” in the Passover Haggadah reflects the fear that has accompanied the Jewish people since the beginning and—over the course of the two thousand years of exile and persecution—has become an inseparable part of its narrative. The State of Israel, which was established in the shadow of the trauma of the Holocaust, has also faced severe threats since its establishment—some of them existential. Israel is in an ongoing state of existential threat as a small country that seeks to fulfill the right to sovereignty of a national and religious minority, surrounded by states that have refused (and some of which still do) to recognize it and consider it a “foreign implant” in the region.<sup>1</sup> The establishment of the State of Israel has thus been accompanied by constant fears that it would be lost, consequently shining a paradoxical light on the Zionist enterprise: On one hand, its establishment was a historic response to Jewish insecurity; on the other hand, Israel is the modern version of this cognitive state.<sup>2</sup> The centrality of fear to Jewish-Israeli existence has advantages and disadvantages: As an advantage, it fulfills a functional role as a catalyst for advancing mechanisms to defend against real threats. These mechanisms include preparing for threats, taking preventive measures to thwart them, and dealing with efforts to carry them out. As a disadvantage, it includes existential anxiety, which—if it does not reflect a real threat—can be a barrier to rationally analyzing a situation, taking calculated risks, realizing opportunities, and making vital strategic decisions.

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The following study is the result of a project conducted at the Institute for National Security Studies in 2018–2020 and provides an analysis of scenarios that could, in the future, pose existential threats to the State of Israel, while seeking to encourage governmental and public discussion on the issue. The study analyzed five severe threat scenarios that could potentially become existential: the formation of a regional military coalition against Israel; the proliferation of nuclear weapons in the Middle East; the collapse of Israeli defense systems due to a massive, combined precision-missile attack led by Iran and its proxies; international isolation and boycott of Israel; and the disintegration of Israeli society and the loss of its internal cohesion and foundations of its Jewish and democratic identity. Each scenario was examined through the parameters of severity and probability given the existing situation and possible future scenarios. The research team pointed out threat catalysts and positive trends that should be maintained and encouraged for each scenario. The team formulated recommendations regarding preventive steps and measures for developing future capabilities to cope with the threat scenarios presented here. Models built for the study helped the teams analyze Israel's security pillars and examine their importance and functioning vis-à-vis the scenarios.

In the following, we discuss the theoretical definitions of the concept *existential threat*, survey the existing research discourse on the issue in the Israeli context, and present the research methodology.

## **Existential Threat**

The concept of existential threat is used in the public and research discourse in Israel as a description of both external security threats such as the Iranian nuclear threat and internal threats to Israeli society such as a deterioration in the achievements of the education system. The existential threat—with its various meanings—can be imagined or real. While defining a threat as existential can be the result of the balance of military power, it can also be based on subjective and controversial views among societies and individuals.<sup>3</sup> As the potential consequences of existential threats are extremely destructive, and since their prevention is justified and the state is even obligated to take significant steps,<sup>4</sup> their definition is critically important.

Research literature on existential threats can be found in several fields. Some studies examine scenarios that could cause the annihilation of the



entire world population or the vast majority of it or make the environment unlivable and offer responses and solutions for them.<sup>5</sup> The threat factors in this context include global warming; severe natural disasters such as an asteroid collision; pandemics; exploitation of all the natural resources; and the misuse of technology and artificial intelligence.<sup>6</sup> Other studies, from the field of psychology, examine the existential threat in the broader context of anxiety about death. The most prominent theory in this context is the terror management theory, which examines how anxiety about an existential threat affects people's self-esteem or their attitude toward moral and cultural issues.<sup>7</sup> In the Israeli context, studies in this field claim that many Israelis experience feelings of continued existential threat and of being under siege.<sup>8</sup> While Israel is a distinct case,<sup>9</sup> studies show that other states and societies also live with a sense of existential threat.<sup>10</sup>

A third field of study—of which this paper is a part—discusses existential threats in military and political contexts. Some studies in this area engage in historical analysis of the sense of an existential threat and its impact on the state's foreign and military policy.<sup>11</sup> Others discuss existential threats from the perspective of the field of security studies. This field is divided into various schools: The traditional approach analyzes international relations from a realistic perspective and focuses on military might and military responses to existential security threats; in contrast, according to the securitization theory, one should differentiate between an existential threat in reality and the concept of the threat as existential. The supporters of this approach claim that overpoliticization can cause “regular” threats—military and civilian—to be presented as if they were existential threats, in order to provide political forces with a pretext for implementing far-reaching measures to thwart them.<sup>12</sup> One example is the description of terrorism as an existential threat. While many would agree that terrorism is a military threat, it is questionable whether it is also an existential threat that undermines the foundations of Western states, as it is occasionally portrayed.<sup>13</sup>

Over the years, whether Israel is subjected to changing existential threats has been the focus of debate among both defense officials and politicians.<sup>14</sup> Two conceptualizations are prominent in Israel's research discourse. Kobi Michael defines an existential threat as a “trend, process or development that significantly threatens the very existence of the State of Israel and its ability to be the national home of the Jewish people.” He divides the existential

threats into three categories: demographic (the loss of the Jewish majority); political (the loss of international legitimacy); and security (military threat). According to Michael, most of the public discussion relates to the third category, while the first two categories—which are no less severe—do not receive much attention.<sup>15</sup> With regard to this specific project, Michael suggests to add a fourth category—the quality or efficiency of governance. Steven David argues that military threats are not the be-all and end-all and concludes that since World War II, the vast majority of states that have been erased from the political map collapsed due to internal ethnic tension and the lack of international legitimacy and were not annihilated by a military threat.<sup>16</sup> According to another conceptualization—proposed by Oren Barak and Gabriel Sheffer—Israel is in a state of “continued existential threat” affected by the circumstances of its establishment, the fact that both internal and external sources see its legitimacy as controversial, and the many expressions of hostility from these sources.<sup>17</sup>

The research presented here is based on two premises: first, that existential threats are dynamic and are influenced by a range of changing factors, including the threat environment, the range of capabilities for dealing with threats, and the subjective perception that specific threats are “existential”; and second, that an existential threat can be posed not only to the military but also to the state’s sovereignty and even its identity and fundamental values. While Israel theoretically could be a political entity that exists separately from its Jewish and democratic identity, the research team believes that this scenario would threaten the essence of its existence, as defined in Israel’s Declaration of Independence and shaped over the years of the state’s existence. Consequently, an existential threat is defined as “a threat with the clear potential to cause real damage that threatens the very existence, sovereignty, conventional identity and/or ability of the state to successfully cope with external and internal dangers.”

This existential threat relates to three main spheres: Israel’s physical security, its sovereignty, and its identity. In terms of Israel’s physical security, an existential threat could critically harm the State of Israel, after which it might not recover and return to normal functioning. An extreme case would be a foreign conquest of the majority of Israel’s territory and population; the collapse of the state’s security capabilities, such as the Israel Defense Forces (IDF); or the complete destruction of much of its essential infrastructure and

mass killing of its residents. In terms of sovereignty, an existential threat would diminish the state's control over its population and resources over time. In terms of identity, an existential threat would destroy the state's moral character as a sovereign, independent, Jewish, and democratic entity that can fulfill its purpose as the nation state of the Jewish people.

In assessing if a threat should be defined as “existential,” it should be asked whether recovery in a reasonable time frame after the materialization of a threat is possible, as this is critical to the definition. The ability to recover could indicate the system's resilience and its ability to cope with severe disruptions, unless the strength of the threat that materializes, together with a lack of prior preparations, destroys the ability to recover. In the last case, a severe threat should be considered “existential.”

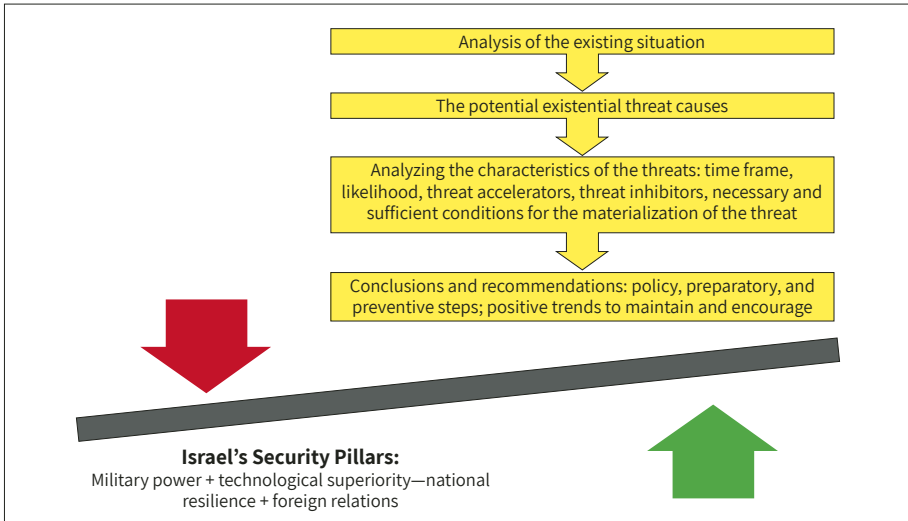
## **Methodology**

The study presented here involves two methodological challenges: the first is the difficulty—and sometimes the inability—to predict existential threats that reflect long-term trends or acute events with destructive consequences in a world of infinite variables, fast changes, and uncertainty. In order to address this challenge, the study turned to the field of future studies and used its methodologies for attempting to predict developments and events in the medium and long term. There are different approaches to predicting the future. One approach is based on previous patterns of activity and models, as in predicting likely trends. Another approach presents possible scenarios with varying degrees of probability that allow decision makers to optimally prepare and expand their perspectives, such as in the attempt to forecast black swans<sup>18</sup> or “wild cards”; that is, potential events whose probability is low but whose impact, if they materialize in extreme situations, could be destructive.<sup>19</sup> According to another approach, the researcher plays a role in not only predicting but also helping to shape and identify the desired future.<sup>20</sup> On this basis, the research team aspired to identify Israel's security pillars and to offer ways of consolidating and strengthening them so that they help prevent the development of existential threats, defend against them, or thwart them.

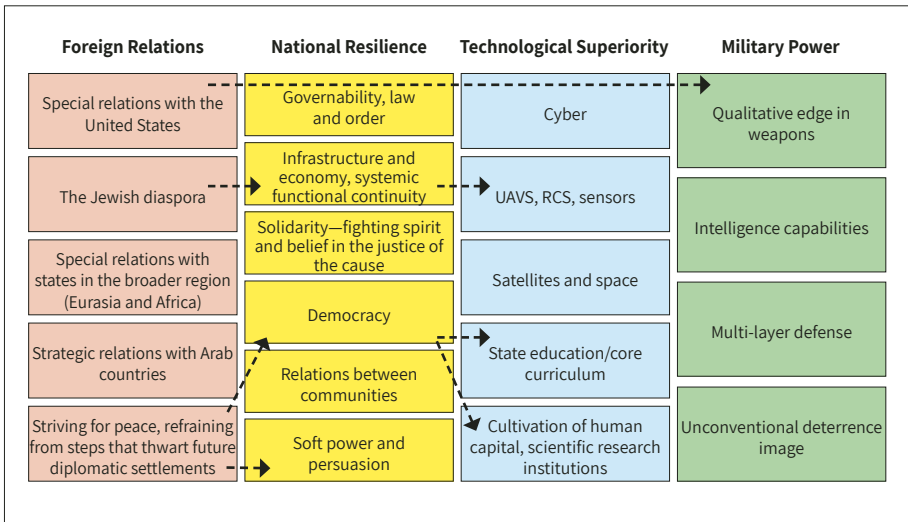
The second challenge in assessing existential threats lies in the influence of the individual's subjective perception on predicting threats and defining them as “existential,” even if they do not have such proven potential—a

situation which creates unconscious cognitive biases that influence the research.<sup>21</sup> Amos Tversky and Daniel Kahneman have shown that people's decision-making process is not rational and rather is influenced by a series of psychological, cultural, and social variables, while their conclusions also have implications for assessment failures in the field of intelligence and in predicting the future.<sup>22</sup> In order to minimize the biases in the study presented here, three guiding principles were applied: having a diversity of researchers from different areas of knowledge—military and security studies (international relations), political science, law, and history—with different approaches for analyzing existential threats and future studies; having a conscious focus on worst case scenarios that could pose an existential threat to the State of Israel; and identifying the security pillars that can accelerate or inhibit the development of various kinds of existential threat scenarios. That being said, it is important to emphasize that the assessments offered here all have an inevitable subjective component. The estimated time frames for the possible materialization of the threat scenarios studied were divided into three categories: the short term (up to five years); the medium term (5–10 years); and the long term (over a decade).

The research process was divided into several stages: In the first stage, the research team defined the term “existential threat”; in the second stage, a number of severe threat scenarios that potentially could become existential were selected; in the third stage, an anonymous questionnaire was drafted and sent to the researchers at INSS, in which they were asked to rank the likelihood and the severity of each threat scenarios selected, given the challenge inherent in them and according to Israel's level of readiness for them. Furthermore, the respondents were asked to propose additional threat scenarios. After calculating the results of the questionnaire, the research team chose five leading threat scenarios and divided into separate research groups to study each scenario. The scenarios were examined according to uniform parameters: analyzing the existing situation regarding the threat in question; identifying factors that accelerate or inhibit/restrain possible threats; assessing the likelihood of the threat and estimated time frames for its possible materialization; and determining policy recommendations (see figure 1).



**Figure 1.** Israel’s security pillars



**Figure 2.** Israel’s security pillars and possible connections between them

The threat scenarios were analyzed using the security pillars model (see figure 2), which helped the research groups systematically analyze the components and characteristics of Israel’s broad and comprehensive military response to each of the five threat scenarios discussed. According to the model, Israel’s response capabilities are based on four overarching

pillars that represent the following categories: military power, technological superiority, national resilience, and foreign relations. These categories represent the variety of capabilities that Israel needs in order to provide a comprehensive security, military, diplomatic, and economic response to the existential threat scenarios included in the study; they fulfill various functions in Israel's national security, in building up its "hard" and "soft" powers, and in keeping existential threats at bay.<sup>23</sup> Here is a breakdown of their components:

**Military power:** Military power forms the toolkit that Israel uses to deter enemies and, if necessary, to neutralize the military threat and seriously harm the enemy. Israel's military edge over its enemies is based on organizational, operational, and human qualities; on advanced combat capabilities; and on the highest level of combat and intelligence measures. This edge has been achieved and is maintained by the continued investment in developing the human resources, in addition to the IDF's command, its value, and the overall defense system. It is also based on independent development, the acquisition of advanced weapons systems, and on stockpiles that are necessary when put to the test. In addition, this edge is particularly the result of the ongoing cultivation of the special relations with the United States. Furthermore, strategic, operative, and tactical intelligence capabilities; passive defense system that is getting stronger; and a unique multi-layer active defense system all increase Israel's ability to successfully cope with military threats. Israel's image of unconventional deterrence also serves as a central component in deterring the regional states, especially within the content of another state posing a nuclear threat but also in terms of other existential threats.

**Technological superiority:** Capabilities in the field of cyber, satellites, space, and UAVs are significant in achieving Israeli technological superiority vis-à-vis potential regional enemies and building up capabilities in the face of potential threats. Technological superiority also provides Israel with "soft power" that helps it achieve national objectives and contributes to its standing in the regional and international arenas. This technological superiority can be attributed to an education system that has emphasized scientific education and has cultivated institutions of scientific study and research that are global leaders at the highest level.

**National resilience** means wisely building up systemic capabilities to successfully cope with severe threats so that disturbances—as they occur—

will be flexibly contained, while allowing for a fast systemic recovery that will restore damaged systems to normal function and even better. Israel's governance capabilities enable it to cope with difficult domestic and external challenges, overcome crises, wisely invest resources in advancing national objectives, and reduce risks posed by strategic threats. These abilities are based on Israel's being a democratic state with advanced and effective management, control, and supervising mechanisms that are capable of mobilizing the national resources for socioeconomic growth, defending national interests, creating broad public confidence in the cause and in the state's institutions, and developing social solidarity. The state's governability and sovereignty, its systemic functional continuity, infrastructure, and economic system all contribute to Israel's national resilience.

**Foreign relations** provide the depth of Israel's resilience and its response, and they are an important tool in preventing and reducing potential threats. Foreign relations include the special relations with the United States, which provide Israel with diplomatic, military, and economic partnerships and are a pillar of Israel's national security; close relations with states in Europe, Asia, and Africa, which are also a significant component of building up Israel's military, diplomatic, and economic capabilities; the connection with diaspora Jews; and peace agreements and forms of cooperation and coordination over shared interests with pragmatic players in the region. Israel's relations with Arab states grant it regional equity, but they are not immune to possible shocks due to political upheavals or extreme events. Striving for peace and diplomatic agreements with its neighbors helps Israel to strengthen its international standing and to fight attempts to isolate and boycott it.

The various security pillars are connected to one another and influence one another, as the arrows in figure 2 show. For example, military capabilities (through necessary military development, which is later translated into and adapted to the needs of the civilian market) help develop technological superiority (which is expressed in innovation, elite technologies, and cyber); technological capabilities serve military capabilities and the national economy; and foreign relations influence infrastructure and the economy, given the characteristics of the Israeli economy, which is export-oriented and dependent on international markets. Israel's conduct in these markets

is influenced, in part, by the quality of its diplomatic relations with players in the international arena.

Arab observers who have analyzed Israel's successful survival, despite its being state of a religious and national minority in the middle of the Arab-Muslim states—some that are hostile—have also pointed to similar security pillars. For example, in a series of articles published between 2018–2019, Egyptian economist Adel El-Labban noted that Israel has the following security pillars: (1) military superiority based on the ability to independently develop advanced weapons, conduct research, and develop cooperation with the arms industries in the United States; (2) the cultivated image of nuclear deterrence and of maintaining a regional nuclear military monopoly; (3) the assurance of a Jewish majority that is vital to maintaining Israel's character by encouraging immigration and by undertaking measures to disengage from the Palestinians; (4) the development of a technology-export economy that turns to the most advanced markets in the world and is not dependent on the markets of Israel's neighbors, in the understanding that a strong economy is essential for strengthening the military and civilian sectors, absorbing waves of Jewish immigration, and developing its foreign relations with the world powers; and (5) the ability to suppress the spirit of resistance and battle among the Arab nations and leaders and instill a sense of weakness and defeatism among them, by convincing them of Israel's superiority and the pointlessness of continuing the struggle against it.<sup>24</sup>

### **The Threat Scenarios**

One of the challenges faced in this study was selecting the threat scenarios. The research team had decided in advance to not focus separately on the Iranian nuclear threat, as previous INSS studies had already examined it in depth.<sup>25</sup> As a result, the Iranian nuclear threat appears as part of two broader threats, with added research value: the formation of a regional coalition and nuclear proliferation in the Middle East (chapters 1 and 2). In addition, it was also decided not to discuss natural disasters in this project, as they are a different genre of existential threats.

Following the questionnaire conducted among INSS researchers, the team chose five leading (but not exclusive) threat scenarios, which are severe threats to Israel and could possibly become existential:



1. *The formation of a regional military coalition against Israel:* This is a physical threat in which an external regional coalition seeks to destroy Israel. The analysis was based on the regional situation, the positions of key states (Iran, Turkey, Egypt, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia), and the possible impact of Israel's policy, external variables, and extreme scenarios.

2. *Nuclear proliferation in the Middle East:* A domino effect of regional nuclearization would occur following the development of nuclear technology—military or civilian—by central regional players, led by Iran, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Turkey. In this scenario, the team analyzed the roles of external players in the nuclearization processes, including Russia, Pakistan, and North Korea, and offered ways in which the international community, the United States, and Israel can prevent them.

3. *The collapse of Israel's defense systems due to a massive, combined precision missile attack led by Iran and its proxies:* A failure of the Israeli response to a combined precision attack on Israel would lead to the collapse of its defense systems and damage its ability to exercise sovereignty. Furthermore, the materialization of this scenario could lead to additional threats—direct and indirect—against Israel, influencing its military capabilities and its national resilience. In this scenario, the team analyzed the nature and outline of a possible attack, as well as critical factors in Israel's defense systems in the face of such an attack.

4. *International isolation and boycott of Israel:* International sanctions, boycott, and isolation would severely harm Israel's military and economic capabilities as well as its international standing. In this scenario, we also discussed the challenges facing Israel's special relations with the United States, as well as between Israel and the Jewish diaspora.

5. *The disintegration of Israeli society and the loss of its internal sources of strength as well as its Jewish and democratic identity:* This scenario would harm the current character of Israel as a Jewish and democratic state and as the home of the Jewish people in the spirit of the Declaration of Independence. In this scenario, threats with severe consequences for Israel, its cohesion, and its way of life were analyzed, including the loss of its democratic identity, the loss of its Jewish identity, and a civil war between different factions of Israeli society.

## Notes

- 1 For more on this, see Oren Barak and Gabriel (Gabi) Sheffer, “Israeli Democracy in the Face of Existential Threats: Comparative Examination,” *Politika* 20 (2010): 77–97, <https://bit.ly/2UqfOOOn> [Hebrew].
- 2 Uriel Abulof, “Free or Fearful? Zionism’s Responses to Jewish Insecurity,” in *Routledge Handbook on Israel Security*, ed. Stuart A. Cohen and Aharon Klieman (London and New York: Routledge, 2019), 13–24, <https://bit.ly/2ZqjFRj>.
- 3 Uriel Abulof, “At the Abyss,” *Azure* 25 (2006), <https://bit.ly/2ZCC906> [Hebrew]; Gilad Hirschberger, “Talking at the Abyss,” Alaxon, April 10, 2014, <https://bit.ly/2RoRWYc> [Hebrew].
- 4 Ian Manners, “European [Security] Union: From Existential Threat to Ontological Security” (working paper, Copenhagen Peace Research Institute, 2002), 10, <https://bit.ly/32nbWAj>.
- 5 Nick Bostrom, “Existential Risks: Analyzing Human Extinction Scenarios and Related Hazards,” *Journal of Evaluation and Technology* 9 (2002), <https://bit.ly/30NYTYD>.
- 6 About the collapse of civilizations throughout history, and the challenges that humanity will face in the twenty-first century, see Jared Diamond, *Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed* (Viking Press, 2005).
- 7 Sheldon Solomon, Jeff Greenberg, and Thomas Pyszczynski, “The Cultural Animal: Twenty Years of Terror Management Theory and Research,” in *Handbook of Experimental Existential Psychology*, ed. Jeff Greenberg, Sander L. Koole, and Thomas Pyszczynski (New York: Guilford, 2004), 13–34.
- 8 Raffaella Del Sarto, *Israel Under Siege: The Politics of Insecurity and the Rise of the Israeli Neo-Revisionist Right* (Washington DC: Georgetown University Press, 2017); Gad Yair, “Israeli Existential Anxiety: Cultural Trauma and the Constitution of National Character,” *Social Identities* 20, no. 4–5 (2014): 346–362, <https://bit.ly/2PztBDt>; Daniel Bar-Tal and Dikla Antebi, “Siege Mentality in Israel,” *Papers on Social Representations* 1 (1992): 49–67, <https://bit.ly/32jrepM>.
- 9 Asaf Siniver, “Israeli Identities and the Politics of Threat: A Constructivist Interpretation,” *Ethnopolitics* 11, no. 1 (2012): 24–42, <https://bit.ly/2Ukfqkq>.
- 10 See, for example, Michael Desch, “Liberalism and the New Definition of the ‘Existential’ Threat,” *Politika* 20 (2010): 15–37, <https://bit.ly/2LcNxrt> [Hebrew]. On the question of whether radical Islam organizations indeed pose an existential threat to the United States, see Francis Fukuyama, “The Neoconservative Moment,” *National Interest* (2004), <https://bit.ly/34i34Oa>; and Charles Krauthammer, “In Defense of Democratic Realism,” *National Interest*, no. 77 (2004): 15–25, <https://bit.ly/2NHWhYo>.
- 11 An example in the Israeli context is the debate on the impact of the sense of existential threat on Israel’s national security policy. See David Tal, *Israel’s Conception of Current Security—Origins and Development, 1949–1956* (Beersheva: Ben Gurion

- University Press, 1997) [Hebrew]; Benny Morris, “On the Researcher’s Obligation,” *Cathedra* 95 (2000): 147–154, <https://bit.ly/2LivYVS> [Hebrew].
- 12 For more on security theory and criticism of it, see Barry Buzan and Others, *Security: A New Framework for Analysis* (Boulder: Lynne Reiner, 1998); Michael Williams, “Words, Images, Enemies: Securitization and International Politics,” *International Studies Quarterly* 47 no. 4 (2003): 511–531, <https://bit.ly/2LiQGF3>.
  - 13 Desch, “Liberalism,” 15–37.
  - 14 See, for example, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s statement that Iran is an existential threat in *Mako*, August 23, 2017, <https://bit.ly/2UmIMOY> [Hebrew]; Israel’s president, Reuven Rivlin, has also spoken about the existential threat posed by the Iranian nuclear program. See, for example, *Ynet*, January 23, 2019, <https://bit.ly/2zCdAlx> [Hebrew]. Efraim Halevy, in contrast, claims that the existential threat is not necessarily Iran but rather “the demographic threat.” See *Arutz Sheva*, April 17, 2018, <https://bit.ly/2ZDwEuh> [Hebrew]. Conversely, former prime minister Ehud Olmert claimed that there is no existential threat to the State of Israel. See *Maariv*, November 21, 2018, <https://bit.ly/2HAY2aG> [Hebrew]. The executive director of INSS, Major General (ret.) Amos Yadlin, also has argued that there is no existential threat to the State of Israel, but rather there are strategic threats. See *Arutz Sheva*, January 13, 2017, <https://bit.ly/2ZnEXim> [Hebrew].
  - 15 Kobi Michael, “Who Really Dictates What an Existential Threat Is? The Israeli Experience,” *Journal of Strategic Studies* 32, no. 5 (2009): 687–713, <https://bit.ly/30OLqzF>.
  - 16 Steven David, “How Do States Die: Lessons for Israel,” *Israel Affairs* 22, no. 2 (2016): 270–290, <https://bit.ly/2HCcVVw>.
  - 17 Barak and Sheffer, “Israeli Democracy.”
  - 18 For more on black swans, see Nassim Nicholas Taleb, *The Black Swan: The Impact of the Highly Improbable* (Random House, 2007).
  - 19 Sandro Mendonca et al. “Wild cards, Weak Signals and Organizational Improvisation,” *Futures* 36, no. 2 (2004): 201–218, <https://bit.ly/2AUkm6P>.
  - 20 David Passig, *The Future Code: Israel’s Future Test* (Tel Aviv: Yedioth Ahronoth, 2008), 60–63 [Hebrew].
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  - 23 See *IDF Strategy*, Chief of Staff’s Office, April 2018, <https://bit.ly/2K6GZev> [Hebrew]; Reut Institute, “Israel’s Relations with the Jewish World: Leading to a ‘Yom Kippur Surprise,’” (June 2019): 7, <https://bit.ly/2HbCOLO> [Hebrew].

- 24 Adel El-Labban, “The Last of the Wars,” *Al-Masry Al-Youm*, December 19, 2018, <https://bit.ly/2Lg7z4G> [Arabic]; “The Last of the Wars: The Iron Hand,” *Al-Masry Al-Youm*, December 26, 2018, <https://bit.ly/2HDS985> [Arabic]; “The Last of the Wars: The Demographic Bomb,” *Al-Masry Al-Youm*, January 2, 2019, <https://bit.ly/2Bgb9WE> [Arabic]; “The Last of the Wars: The Money and the Will,” *Al-Masry Al-Youm*, January 9, 2019, <https://bit.ly/2LeNrjl> [Arabic].
- 25 See, for example, Ephraim Kam, *A Nuclear Iran: What Does it Mean, and What Can be Done*, Memorandum 87 (Tel Aviv: INSS, 2007), <https://bit.ly/34eUaBh> [Hebrew].

# The Creation of a Regional Coalition Against Israel: Obstacles and Warning Signs

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Shlomo Brom and Ofir Winter

In April 2018, the IDF Strategy document was published, which assessed that “in recent years and in looking to the coming years, Israel’s strategic standing is solid and has a ‘positive balance sheet’ that is better than all of its enemies in the region.” According to the document, the implication of such a balance sheet “diminishes the potential for war against a military-political coalition.”<sup>1</sup>

Indeed, an analysis of the overall regional situation, which includes Israel, and individual analyses of the states that could be a central threat reference show that Israel is unlikely to face a broad regional Arab-Islamic coalition in the foreseeable future that would pose an existential—not even serious—threat to its security. The reasons for this are varied, including the absence of a hegemonic, conventional ideology that champions this objective; Israel’s military advantage and the lack of sufficient military power and resources among its potential enemies; inherent and unbridgeable internal divisions and rifts within the Arab and Islamic camps; great support for Israel by the United States; the weakness of the Arab state framework and the inward focus of the states in the region; the view among some of the Arab states that Israel is an ally—albeit covertly—in addressing shared strategic threats, which they see as more important than the conflict with Israel; and the

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diminished effectiveness of using Israel (the so-called “Zionist entity”) as a scapegoat for domestic problems and for diverting public opinion toward an external enemy.

In theory, this situation could be reversed by intense regional changes—unlikely in the short term—such as the Arab states reducing their focus on their internal affairs, which has characterized them since the outset of the Arab Spring; mitigation of the Sunni-Shiite conflict; or the fall of pragmatic regimes friendlier to Israel. Without such processes, even extreme events that would arouse severe anti-Israel sentiment within the public opinion in countries throughout the region—such as intentional damage to the Al-Aqsa Mosque, killings of large numbers of Palestinians attributed to Israel or to Israelis, or the unilateral annexation of territories in Judea and Samaria—are unlikely to cause the regimes to shift their policy and create a broad regional coalition that would seek to pose an existential threat toward Israel, although they certainly would severely condemn Israel and undertake punitive steps, such as recalling ambassadors and downgrading peaceful relations.

### **Background: The Regional Situation in Historical Perspective**

During the years 1948–1979, from the War of Independence to the signing of the peace treaty with Egypt, there was a real possibility that the Arab states would establish military alliances aimed at posing an existential threat to Israel. During most of this period, pan-Arabism, led by Egypt’s president, Gamal Abdel Nasser, and the Ba’ath parties in Syria and Iraq, dominated the Arab world. According to this ideology, Israel is an artificial colonialist entity that was established in the heart of the Arab world with the West’s support to serve foreign interests. The Arab regimes that advocated this ideology saw Israel as a threat to its neighbors and its surroundings, and as an impediment to realizing the long-awaited Arab unity and the yearnings of the Arab nation. Despite the aversion expressed by the Arab monarchies, such as Saudi Arabia, Morocco, and Jordan, toward the revolutionary regimes that championed the pan-Arab ideology, Pan-Arabism had wide support among the Arab population, and the monarchies were forced to toe the line. The rifts that appeared within the pan-Arab ideological family, especially between Egypt and Syria following the break-up of the United Arab Republic (1967), only bolstered the struggle against Israel as the essential “unifying glue” that helped blur the differences between both states and leaders.

The Six-Day War was a milestone in the standing of pan-Arab ideology. It led to processes of ideological change that had a dual and contradictory effect on how the conflict with Israel was perceived. On one hand, the defeat of Egypt, Syria, and Jordan on the battlefield aroused self-criticism and accelerated the decline of the pan-Arab ideology that had reigned during the days of Nasser, following its total failure to realize its objectives and aspirations in the political and military sphere. This change led the Arab states to place greater emphasis on their own particular interests and to reassess uncompromising positions regarding the conflict with Israel, which harmed their own interests. On the other hand, and in parallel, the sense of humiliation that followed the Arab defeat in 1967 coupled with Israel's continued control of the territories that it had conquered strengthened anti-Israel sentiments and increased the interest in the conflict. It solidified the Arab world's personal connection with the conflict and strengthened religious aspects of the conflict; the Arab states' sense of self-righteousness was bolstered, as was their commitment to continue the struggle against Israel. They continued to deny Israel's existence, while they cultivated animosity and desire for revenge, and increased the demonization of Jews and of Zionism.<sup>2</sup> As a result, the Arab states increased the military cooperation between them in order to reconquer the territories that they had lost in the war and "to erase the traces of [Israeli] aggression." These factors contributed to the cooperation between Egypt and Syria in the Yom Kippur War in 1973 and to the willingness of additional Arab states—such as Jordan—to send forces, even if symbolic, to aid the war effort. In addition, the Palestinian guerrilla struggle against Israel, which intensified after the Six-Day War, especially from Jordanian territory, was popularly received by the Arab street, although it received limited support from the Arab governments.<sup>3</sup>

The partial achievements that Egypt attained in the Yom Kippur War—which in Egyptian public opinion, with government encouragement, erased the sense of humiliation following the 1967 defeat—contributed to the public's willingness to consider new courses of action in the conflict with Israel. In addition, despite the initial surprise, the IDF's recovery on the battlefield—with superpower support from the United States—strengthened the understanding, especially in Egypt, that continuing the military struggle against Israel was futile.<sup>4</sup> The combination of the declining status of pan-Arabism and these processes of change led to the gradual disintegration of

the unified Arab front against Israel and increasing Arab willingness to reach pragmatic diplomatic settlements with Israel. During the years 1974–1977, interim agreements were concluded between Israel and Egypt and Syria, and Jordan and Israel held talks on reaching a territorial settlement in the West Bank, but the understandings were limited. As a result, Jordan was pushed from the center of the peace process, and Egypt assumed its place.<sup>5</sup> As a result of negotiations that began following Sadat’s visit to Jerusalem in November 1977, Egypt signed a pioneering peace agreement with Israel in March 1979, despite broad Arab opposition. Although this led to Egypt’s temporary removal from the Arab League, it was the first crack in the Arab states’ united front against Israel and in their fundamental opposition to peace, recognition, and negotiations with it, as stated in the “Three No’s” at the Khartoum Summit in September 1967. During the 1980s, the Arab states’ categorical opposition to peace with Israel continued to gradually erode, culminating with implicitly recognizing Israel with the approval of the Fahd Plan at the Arab League Summit held in Fez in September 1982.<sup>6</sup>

Alongside the erosion of the united front against Israel, the cracks, fissures, and tensions in the Arab and Islamic world had become more pronounced. In 1980, Iraq, led by Saddam Hussein, began an eight-year war against Iran, and in 1990, it invaded Kuwait, a sister Arab state, out of economic considerations. In response, Arab states joined the international coalition against Iraq. Meanwhile, the collapse of the Soviet Union and the loss of its support, as well as the transition to a world dominated by one superpower—the United States—led the Arab states to abandon the idea that they could defeat Israel militarily and encouraged some states in the region to turn to the path of peace. In October 1991, these trends led to the Madrid Conference and later to negotiations between Israel and its neighbors, followed by the signing of the Oslo Accords in August 1993 and September 1995, and the peace agreement between Israel and Jordan in 1994.<sup>7</sup>

The ideological vacuum as a result of the decline of pan-Arabism was partly replaced with the Islamist alternative. The most prominent representative of this ideology among the Sunnis is the Muslim Brotherhood, which was established in Egypt in 1928 and spread to additional states under the slogan “Islam is the solution.” The Muslim Brotherhood called for perceiving Islam as the source of authority for conduct in all areas of life and as the cure for the political weakness of the Arab nation and the Islamic community



in the modern era. The refusal to recognize the existence of a Jewish state and the obligation of jihad to eliminate it are fundamental principles of the Islamist ideology, and it provides a basis for collective Arab-Islamic action against Israel. Although the Arab public has lent support to Islamist ideas, the Islamist parties have had difficulty assuming power. As a result, their influence has been expressed in the establishment and flourishing of radical non-state movements: Some are violent movements, such as al-Qaeda and the Islamic State (Daesh), which advocate the use of force to implement their ideology within the Arab states and do not limit their ambitions to a single state, and some are more social-political movements, such as the Muslim Brotherhood, Hamas, and Hezbollah, which see political measures, social instruments and religious preaching as the preferred means of achieving influence and ultimately coming to power. These two types of movements did not contribute to the unification of the Arab world against Israel; rather, on the contrary.

The Arab regimes most fully expressed their acceptance of the existence of Israel in the Arab League peace initiative of 2002, in contrast to the Islamist forces. At the same time, many Arab regimes have perceived Islamist forces as a threat and as their main enemy. Iran, which has been controlled by a Shiite Islamic regime since 1979, has served as a source of ideological, financial, and operative inspiration for the Islamist movements and has taken a militant stance toward Israel. Sunni regimes also have seen Iran as a challenging, threatening, and even hostile force. Iran's policies have deepened the Sunni-Shiite rift in the Arab world and have increased the significance of this schism to the point that it has become a central issue in Arab politics and has pushed the Arab-Israeli conflict to the margins.

The upheaval of the Arab Spring, which began at the end of 2010, further strengthened this regional trend. While the Muslim Brotherhood succeeded in assuming power through free elections in Egypt in June 2012, the dominant establishment forces quickly counter reacted with popular support, led to their overthrow and restored the army's hegemony. In other states, such as Syria, Libya, and Yemen, civil wars broke out in which Islamist and Salafi-jihadi organizations played a central role, resulting in the formation of opposing coalitions within those states—with regional and international support—that fought each other, thus reversing most of their achievements vis-à-vis the regimes. Hezbollah, Iran's ally and proxy in Lebanon, became popular on

the Arab street following the Second Lebanon War in 2006; however, the role that it played in the civil war in Syria and Yemen created cracks in its image as a “resistance” movement that sees the struggle against Israel as paramount.<sup>8</sup>

With the perspective of nearly a decade, the developments of the Arab Spring led mainly to the intensification of internal struggles within Arab states, to their focus on rehabilitation and stabilization of their internal situation, and to their involvement in regional issues in which Israel is not at the center, such as Iran, the forces of political Islam, and Salafi-jihadi organizations. At this stage, the trends described above seem to have created opportunities for cooperation between Israel and states in the region rather than having created a regional coalition against Israel. The domestic problems and regional struggles have highlighted the shared interests that the Arab states have with Israel, as an ally in the struggle against the Islamist movements and Iran, and have rendered the Palestinian problem a lower priority for the Arab states and their populations than in the past. In these circumstances, Israel has become a member of the regional “stability camp” along with pragmatic Sunni Arab states, including Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and the United Arab Emirates.<sup>9</sup>

Responses in the Arab world to important developments in the Israeli-Palestinian arena have remained weak, including the reactions to the ongoing deadlock in the Israeli-Palestinian diplomatic process; the Trump administration’s pressure on the Palestinians; the transfer of the US embassy to Jerusalem, and the expansion of the settlements. Saudi Arabia has pressured the Palestinians to accept some of Israel’s demands; Egypt has cooperated with Israel in dealing with the challenges in the Gaza Strip and the Sinai; and even the overt normalization of relations between Israel and the Gulf States has increased. In the past, assumingly when the Arab regimes had domestic problems, they employed animosity toward Israel to divert the public’s attention and to prevent any focus on the opposition to the government. This phenomenon has diminished considerably and seems to be partly the result of changes in how the populations of the Arab states see the sources of internal and external problems. Polls clearly show that changes are taking place among the younger Arab generation, which is exposed to new media and is not afraid to examine more critical approaches to traditional state narratives regarding Israel.<sup>10</sup> However, the pace of change among the

Arab population is still notably slow compared to that of the positions of the Arab governments.

In summary, in terms of the regional picture, there is no coalition of Arab and Islamic states on the horizon that would pose an existential threat to Israel. Firstly, among the states there is an absence of a hegemonic, conventional ideology that aims to destroy Israel. Secondly, there is a lack of resources that would enable preparing and implementing joint actions against Israel. Thirdly, Israel has strengthened its position among some of the Arab states as an ally in coping with domestic and external threats; in other words, today a significant group of Arab states sees the struggle against Israel as being far more costly than beneficial. Finally, the idea of the struggle against Israel as a convenient means of distracting public opinion in Arab states from domestic problems—such as the economic, health, education, and welfare situation, violations of human and civil rights, and deterioration of personal security—has diminished. Instead, the most likely military threats to Israel include a limited coalition of non-state actors, such as Hamas and Hezbollah, perhaps with the support of Iran and Syria.

### **The Situation in Prominent States in the Region**

The four states that could pose the most severe threat to Israel, given their military might, are Turkey, Egypt, Iran, and Saudi Arabia.<sup>11</sup> We can add Jordan to this list, as it shares the longest border with Israel. Even though Egypt and Jordan have stable peace agreements with Israel, their regimes are coping with forces that challenge their standing, mainly the Muslim Brotherhood, while they are also trying to stabilize the economic and military spheres. Jordan suffers from a relatively weak regime, which could enable internal and external groups that are hostile to Israel to take over. Saudi Arabia is armed with up-to-date American weapons, but it is largely preoccupied with its front in Yemen, where its army has performed poorly against the Houthi rebels. As for Iran and Turkey, they are both Islamist powers with strong armies and ideologies that are hostile to varying degrees toward Israel and are patrons at differing levels of violent non-state groups that are struggling against Israel. The danger posed by Iran to Israel is more severe than that of Turkey, as Iran is an enemy state that openly has declared its desire to destroy Israel; is advancing a program to develop long-term missiles that can reach Israel; is working to consolidate its military presence in Syria;

is providing weapons and training to Syria, Hezbollah, Hamas, and the Islamic Jihad; and—above all—has not given up on its strategic ambition of attaining nuclear weapons.

### *Egypt*

Examining Egypt's potential role in a regional coalition against Israel is necessary due to its proximity to Israel, its size, and the strength of its army; the fact that it sees itself as a regional leader; its close relations with Russia; and its history of having led joint Arab actions against Israel (namely the 1948, 1967, and 1973 wars). Egypt's joining of a military effort would therefore be a significant and even decisive factor in the ability of the regional states to form an effective regional military coalition against Israel and would pose a severe and even existential threat to Israel.

Moreover, even though Egypt has maintained a stable peace treaty with Israel for the past forty-one years—based on strong military, diplomatic, and economic foundations and on the basic notion that peace with Israel is a strategic interest for Egypt—it is a “lukewarm” peace, which lacks a strong civilian basis and does not include broad, multidisciplinary normalization and reconciliation between the nations. This issue—along with Egypt's continued military buildup, the gradual erosion (with Israel's consent) of the limitations on military deployments in the Sinai Peninsula included in the military appendix of the peace agreement, and the fundamental hostility among a significant segment of Egypt's population toward Israel and any attempts to normalize relations with it—do not completely negate the possibility of Egypt's joining a regional coalition against Israel in the long term. A poll of the Arab Barometer from June 2019 shows that 54 percent of Egyptians see Israel as the central threat to their country.<sup>12</sup> The two revolutions that Egypt has experienced since 2011—alongside the challenges that continue to threaten the stability of the regime in Cairo—serve as a warning sign that the current reality could change, and Egypt's policy toward Israel could be reversed.

In addition to the basic factors that increase the threat to Israel's peace with Egypt and create a risk that it will join a military coalition against Israel, Egypt has experienced a series of processes and trends in recent decades that indicate that the risk of such a scenario is very low, at least in the foreseeable future, and especially under the current regime. First, the political turbulence

that Egypt has experienced since the January 2011 revolution, as well as economic and demographic challenges, require that it focus on domestic, economic, and internal security issues and on stabilizing the state and the regime. Second, the status of supra-national ideologies (pan-Arabism, pan-Islamism) has declined in Egypt in particular and in the region in general.

Third, despite being lukewarm, the peace between Israel and Egypt has proven over the course of four decades a strategic value to both countries and is stable and resilient, given the wide range of intra-Egyptian and bilateral challenges and the rounds of serious violence between Israel and the Palestinians and between Israel and Hezbollah. The strategic value of peace currently includes unprecedented relations of trust and cooperation in dealing with the shared challenges in the struggle against the threat of Salafi-jihadi and Islamist terrorism in Sinai and the Gaza Strip. In the diplomatic sphere, the close relations between Israel and the administration in Washington have strengthened Egypt's perception of the value of peace with Israel. In the economic sphere, the long-term natural gas deal that Egypt and Israel signed in February 2018 increases the material value inherent in peace—beyond its basic importance in the guarantee of American financial aid to Egypt and the QIZ agreements (industrial areas in Egypt, which are exempt from taxes on exports to the United States).

Fourth, the peaceful relations between Egypt and Israel are backed by a supportive regional axis, which includes the pragmatic Sunni Arab states that see Israel as a partner in the struggle against Iran and the Salafi-jihadi movements and as an anchor for regional stability. Fifth, the deep rifts between Egypt and Turkey and Qatar, the states of the Islamist axis, and to a lesser extent with Iran make it very difficult for them to create a united front against Israel.

The joining of Egypt in a military coalition against Israel would require translating a supra-Egyptian (Arab nationalist or religious-Islamist) sense of identity into solidarity, commitment, and ultimately effective action. In practice, the identity discourse that Abdel Fattah el-Sisi's regime has constructed since the June 2013 revolution suggests an opposite trend: On one hand, an effort has been made to form an Egyptian identity that is a counter-image of the Islamist identity advocated by the Muslim Brotherhood. If during the Nasser era, the "West," "colonialism," or "Zionism" were the principle "other," opposite which Egyptian identity was constructed, today

the Muslim Brotherhood fulfills that function. At the same time, Egyptian national identity is at the center, and the idea that it is based on a diverse mosaic of seven pillars—pharaonic, Greco-Roman, Coptic, Islamic, Arab, Middle-Eastern, and African—is emphasized. This identity construction is new and contrasts with the Nasser era's emphasis on Egypt's Arab identity as well as with the significance placed on the Islamic element of Egypt's identity by the Muslim Brotherhood. The current identity discourse, if it is indeed incorporated, is likely to positively influence relations between Egypt and Israel, given the religious tolerance inherent in it, including toward Judaism, and thanks to the economic issues that this discourse emphasizes when the shared geographical spheres of the two states are discussed, mainly the significance of the eastern Mediterranean with its natural gas fields.<sup>13</sup>

### *Jordan*

Despite the twenty-five-year-long peace treaty between Israel and Jordan, geopolitically the latter can still pose a potential risk in a scenario of joining a coalition against Israel. The reasons include the long border between the states and its proximity to important areas in Israel; the Palestinian refugees who make up about half of the population of Jordan, who disapprove of recognizing Israel; and the traditional weakness of the Jordanian regime in the face of internal and external pressures. Historically, Jordan has repeatedly been dragged several times into serving as a platform for collective Arab action against Israel and has even actively participated in fighting, although generally against both the will of its leadership and the interest of the Hashemite Kingdom. The most dramatic example was in 1967, when King Hussein joined the Arab coalition led by Egypt and as a result lost the West Bank. Years later, in 1990, King Hussein supported the president of Iraq, Saddam Hussein, in the Gulf War. Because of Jordan's domestic and foreign weakness, King Hussein saw both cases of cooperation with the radical Arab leaderships as an inevitable necessity and as the best of the worst scenarios compared to other options.<sup>14</sup>

During 2018 and 2019, the Jordanian regime's policy toward Israel negatively shifted. This shift occurred as a result of Israel's policy toward Jordan and the Palestinians but also because of political instability and internal unrest. The internal unrest rose from economic hardship—caused partly by the pressure placed on resources by the flow of refugees mainly from

Syria—and from the public’s growing distress over the country’s corruption and growing distrust of the monarchy. These factors have aroused resentment even among the Bedouin tribes that over the years were considered the pillar of the Hashemite Kingdom. One of the consequences of this internal unrest was King Abdullah’s decision in October 2018 not to renew the “special regimes” that were established in border areas in the peace agreement with Israel—a step that should be seen as an attempt to satisfy the majority of the Jordanian public who disapprove of the peace treaty with Israel. King Abdullah took this step, even though it involved risking Jordan’s main interest in economic and strategic cooperation with Israel. Currently, most of this cooperation takes place out of the public eye.<sup>15</sup>

However, despite significant pockets of opposition to peace with Israel within the Jordanian public, and despite the weakness that Jordan has demonstrated recently in the face of pressure, the Jordanian royal kingdom does not have any strategic interest nor resources to actively participate in a military coalition against Israel. It rather cooperates with Israel against its perceived enemies. It will presumably continue to maintain cool relations with Israel at the public level while cultivating close and beneficial relations at the strategic levels and will refrain from entering an anti-Israel military coalition that could threaten its essential interests and even its very existence. Should the current reality continue, Jordan is likely to persist in playing the dual role of an intermediary state that connects all the adversaries on that side of the world while also serving as a buffer zone that separates them.

### ***Iran***

Although Iran is not part of the Arab world, it does strive to expand its influence in the Middle East and even to achieve hegemonic standing there. Iran poses a threat to Israel with its ideological approach that denies the existence of the state of Israel, its military nuclearization efforts, and its advanced capabilities in the field of long-range missiles. In addition, Iran has the ability to establish military infrastructure and advanced strategic systems (for example in the fields of missiles and unmanned aerial vehicles for the purposes of gathering intelligence and engaging ground targets) in states bordering Israel, namely Lebanon and Syria. In exceptional circumstances, Iran could even send limited military forces (usually led by the Revolutionary Guard) beyond its borders, as it has done in Syria in recent years.

Alongside the direct Iranian threat, Iran provides extensive military and economic aid to its proxies active in the region, namely Hezbollah in Lebanon, the pro-Iranian Shiite militias in Iraq, the Palestinian Islamic Jihad, and the Houthis in Yemen, who potentially endanger Israel's shipping in the Red Sea. As a rule, Iran prefers to use proxies to strengthen its regional influence in order to shroud its direct involvement in the region and to refrain from risking its fighters in the combat zones in which it is involved. Iran also strives to refrain as much as possible from direct conflict with Israel, which could lead to an Israeli attack on targets within its territory. As a result, this decreases the likelihood that Iran would be directly involved in an Arab coalition against Israel by launching surface-to-surface missiles from its territory toward Israel, and even more, by sending military forces into combat. However, we can assume that in any scenario of an Israeli-Arab conflict, Iran would aid the forces fighting against Israel as much as it could.

### *Turkey*

Turkey could pose a significant threat to Israel on its own—having the second largest army in NATO after the United States and consistently investing some two percent of its GDP in military spending, in accordance with NATO states commitments—and as part of a broader coalition. But despite these capabilities, it is doubtful that Turkey has active hostile intentions toward Israel, beyond the rhetorical level. From a rational perspective, Turkey has no interest in engaging in conflict with Israel, as it is a status-quo player that is interested in increasing stability in the Middle East in order to increase its trade with the region. NATO is also a factor, restricting Turkey from becoming an enemy state that would exercise military force against Israel. Although the Mavi Marmara incident in Gaza waters in 2010 demonstrated the possibility of a direct confrontation between Israel and Turkey, the fact that no similar events have occurred since then supports the supposition that even though Turkey and Israel have had adversarial relations, Turkey clearly has not allowed its relations to further deteriorate. Although the eastern Mediterranean has the potential for conflict between the two countries, following the discovery of energy resources there and the ongoing conflict with Cyprus, the nature of a conflict in the sub-region most likely would result in gunboat diplomacy and not reach outright conflict.



As for the internal Turkish arena, the regime believes that it is still in danger and that the struggle following the failed coup attempt in July 2016 is not yet over. The narrative promoted by President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and his supporters is that since Erdoğan's rise to power, Turkey has become too strong in the view of the West, and, therefore, the Western states (including Israel) are working together to weaken it. This narrative is based on anti-Israel views that already exist among the Turkish public, and the regime fosters them. Indeed, in public opinion polls conducted in Turkey during recent years, the vast majority of respondents have expressed a negative opinion of Israel<sup>16</sup> and have considered Israel "one of the central threats to Turkey."<sup>17</sup> Although anti-Israel sentiment is a convenient platform for adopting a militant policy—if Erdoğan were interested in such—so far it has only been channeled into a policy of non-violently challenging Israel.

A scenario in which Turkey becomes a revisionist force<sup>18</sup> like Iran would be exceptional, considering its history and Atatürk's legacy. Even though Erdoğan and his supporters are undermining Atatürk's legacy in many areas, when it comes to foreign policy toward the Middle East, they seem to have less leeway, as this is a system full of regional powers with opposing and restraining aspirations. Turkey's withdrawal from NATO would clearly reflect revisionist conceptions, but currently Turkey has made no signs of this. Furthermore, unlike declarations regarding the possibility of stopping the negotiations with Brussels over Turkey's joining the European Union, Ankara has not made any similar declarations regarding withdrawal from NATO.

### ***Saudi Arabia***

The likelihood of Saudi Arabia joining an Arab coalition against Israel is low due to a number of circumstances and conditions, mainly that the two states are both in the pro-American camp in the region and share concerns about Iran's intentions and activities. Despite this optimistic situation assessment and the strategic opportunities inherent in it for Israel, Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman's Saudi Arabia is characterized by risk-taking, and, thus, it is difficult to predict its future actions. While Saudi Arabia's unpredictable behavior has advantages for deterring Iran, as of 2019, the costs of this policy for the kingdom have outweighed its achievements and have increased its vulnerability. In addition, while Israel's cooperation with the

kingdom has borne some fruit, its strategic value should not be exaggerated nor should Israel be overly dependent upon it.

The Iranian threat is the main common denominator between Saudi Arabia and Israel. The struggle between Iran and Saudi Arabia is mainly indirect, but the two states also engage in a direct struggle that includes mutual attempts at subversion using various means. Saudi Arabia has significant economic capabilities, a certain ability to do damage, and the means to prompt third parties to take action. In addition, Saudi Arabia (along with the United Arab Emirates and, to a lesser extent, Israel) sees the pro-Islamist axis, led by Turkey and Qatar, as a threat to its standing and stability and is working against it. Israel and Saudi Arabia are also active in other arenas of shared interest, such as the Syrian-Lebanese arena and that of the Red Sea.

However, several factors make Saudi Arabia a poor ally. In the regional domain, the kingdom's standing has been harmed by the failure of some of bin Salman's actions, such as his attempt to lead an effective Arab boycott of Qatar and his involvement in the civil war in Yemen. In the international sphere, Saudi Arabia's connection with Israel does not replace the strategic relationship that it has with the United States, upon which it is dependent to a certain extent. In the military realm, although the kingdom's military budget is among the largest in the world, its military power remains limited because its army is small and untrained and relies upon foreigners. Furthermore, it is very vulnerable due to its long and porous borders. Internally, bin Salman—the ruler in practice—has yet to stabilize his rule. This process will take time, and it is rife with dangers. Additional risks for Israel are posed by the Saudi buildup of modern conventional and unconventional weapons. In the conventional field, Saudi Arabia desires to acquire high-quality weapons, especially surface-to-surface missiles, attack UAVs, and precision-guided munitions; in the nuclear field, Saudi Arabia openly desires to acquire nuclear power reactors and insists on maintaining the option of enriching uranium. These capabilities might pose significant risks to Israel, if Saudi Arabia becomes a hostile state.

### **Possible Causes for the Emergence of Regional Threats**

An analysis of the regional situation in general and of the states that could potentially threaten Israel in particular shows that the formation of a regional military coalition against Israel in the foreseeable future is unlikely. Moreover,

significant changes to the existing regimes and their guiding agenda would have to occur for this assessment to change. However, when analyzing the security pillars that stave off the formation of a regional military coalition that seeks to destroy Israel, several possible turning points could be considered. These turning points could, in the future, lead to changes in the current trend and generate or accelerate processes that create threat scenarios or at least increase their likelihood. These turning points are as follows:

***The undermining of the stability of the pragmatic Arab regimes (Egypt, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia)***

One of the most significant anchors that prevent the formation of a regional coalition against Israel is its strategic relations with states in the region, based on a variety of shared interests: a pro-American orientation; the desire to reduce Iran's influence; the struggle against the Islamist and Salafi-jihadist movements; and the quest for stability and economic well-being. These common interests between Israel and the region's states could change following the fall of rulers and regimes and the rise of leaders or forces with an alternative agenda that is hostile to Israel, such as an Islamist agenda. In Egypt, for example, five years after the Muslim Brotherhood was outlawed, defined as "terrorists," and denounced, about a third of the public still has "somewhat positive" opinions about the Muslim Brotherhood, and it still serves as a prominent political alternative to the existing order.<sup>19</sup> In addition, the rise of Islamists in one state could affect other states in the region. Furthermore, the very existence of a real threat to the stability of the pragmatic Arab regimes—certainly if it is accompanied by a serious escalation of events in the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians, the worsening of economic and social challenges, or a fundamental change in the web of shared interests with Israel—could also lead these regimes to renew the old practice of trying to channel internal public anger toward Israel, the external enemy, despite its limited effectiveness since the Arab Spring.

Israel's main concern of an upheaval in the Arab states focuses on its two neighboring partners in peace, Egypt and Jordan. The two countries could change their policy toward Israel should two developments occur: first, if they respond to internal political pressure to fulfill a role—even if symbolic—in a campaign against Israel, including one that is organized and led by others; second, if a regime change occurs, which leads to significant

redefining of the state's strategic interests. As for Jordan, in both possible scenarios, it could become a platform for action against Israel, if not an active participant. The likelihood of such developments is difficult to estimate. Since the 1940s, assessments about the instability of Jordan's regime and its impending collapse have been repeatedly unfounded. The regime even successfully avoided the wave of revolutions that other Arab states experienced after 2011 as part of the Arab Spring (in part by sacrificing prime ministers—a step that repeatedly has served as a replacement for painful reforms). Of course, a regime's ability to survive thus far does not guarantee that it will be successful in the future, but it does demand that predictions of the imminent demise of the royal house be more cautious. In addition, despite its challenges, the Hashemite Kingdom has succeeded in maintaining a cool but constructive relationship with Israel, based in part on Jordan's dependence upon Israel for water and energy. The cutting of all sources of foreign economic aid withstanding, it is difficult to imagine any event—except for an especially outrageous Israeli provocation—that would fundamentally change the dynamic of the relations between the two states.

Another concern is that regime changes could lead to the development of cooperation between the new regimes and more distant regional powers, especially Iran and Turkey. Without any change of government in Egypt and Saudi Arabia, it is difficult to imagine a scenario of Turkish-Arab military cooperation against Israel, beyond continued Turkish diplomatic support for Hamas. In addition, it is more likely that Israel, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and even Greece and Cyprus would cooperate in order to block Turkey from expanding its influence in the Middle East and in the eastern Mediterranean. Even if another revolution occurs in Egypt and a leader from the Muslim Brotherhood assumes power, we can suppose that—as during the rule of President Mohamed Morsi—it would not necessarily lead to harmonious relations between Turkey and Egypt but rather to competition over regional leadership. Large-scale Iranian-Turkish military cooperation against Israel also appears unlikely given the competition between these two regional powers for influence in the region and given Iran's preference for operating via proxies. Revisionist conceptions would be evident if Turkey were to withdraw from NATO, which would enable it to more freely engage in activity against Israel.

### ***The erosion of Israel's military and technological advantage***

The Arabs' lack of motivation to engage in military action against Israel can be also contributed to Israel's military power and the Arab states' relative weakness. These two factors have greatly strengthened Israel's deterrence. Israel's qualitative military edge (QME) is based on its advanced weapons and trained high-quality personnel, in addition to the commitment of the United States to maintain Israel's QME. As for the weakness of the Arab armies, to some extent, this is a result of the events of the Arab Spring. In states that have experienced civil strife, such as Syria, Libya, and Yemen, the armies have collapsed or have focused on internal security and fighting rebels, thus neglecting classical military capabilities. States that have maintained their military establishment, such as Egypt, have prioritized their focus on internal security and fighting subversive elements over maintaining their military competence vis-à-vis other state militaries. However, we must not ignore the threat to Israel's qualitative edge as a result of the advanced weapon systems (American, European, Chinese, and Russian) that some Arab states have acquired.

Indeed, there are signs that some elements of Israel's qualitative edge are possibly eroding due to the buildup of different armed forces in the region, especially those of Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Iran. These states all seek to obtain some sort of regional leadership, which can be achieved partly by building up an offensive military force. This buildup is possible because the United States has removed previous limitations on providing certain categories of weapons to states that it considers allies, such as Egypt and the Arab Gulf states, some of which have considerable financial resources and because Russia and China are developing weapon systems in innovative categories, such as missile defense, terminally guided munitions, and attack UAVs.

States in the region, US allies or foes, enjoy these technological developments in Russia and China, which compete with those of the United States and Israel. Neither Russia nor China are hesitant to provide advanced technologies to Arab states including Israel's adversaries; they are even willing to sell weapons systems to countries whose main source of procurement is the United States, but it refuses to sell them so that Israel can maintain its qualitative edge.<sup>20</sup> These processes do not pose an immediate threat to Israel, as a result of several factors, including the IDF's simultaneous buildup of its

own capabilities; the current preferences of most of the region's regimes to maintain strategic relations with Israel (Egypt, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia) or to challenge Israel mostly via proxies (Iran) or through non-military means (Turkey); the focus of these states on internal security problems; the lack of sufficient common denominators unifying the region's states, which are divided among themselves; and the international commitments of the states mentioned above (peace agreements with Israel in the case of Egypt and Jordan and Turkey's NATO membership).

Changes in the military balance and political shifts in the Arab states could alter their preferences and considerations in the future. For example, changes in the balance of capabilities between Israel and its neighbors—from improving the level of their human capital to significantly reducing the technological gaps—could, in theory, erode Israel's deterrence and also affect the balance of intentions. Factors that could accelerate such changes include a serious undermining of the US commitment to maintain Israel's qualitative edge over its neighbors; the end of US military aid to Israel; a brain drain from Israel and the dwindling of Israel's human capital due to socioeconomic reasons; a significant improvement in the human capital, military technology, and the force capabilities of militaries in the region; or an external military force from out of the region with advanced weapons (such as the Russian army) joining an anti-Israel regional coalition.

### ***Undermining international support for Israel***

Relations with the international community, and especially with the United States, are a significant component of Israel's security. They are manifested by the economic relations with the Western states, extensive international support for Israel, recognition of Israel's right to exist, and US diplomatic and military support. These relations assist Israel in building up its military and diplomatic power, strengthening the pragmatic regional trends of recognizing Israel as an undeniable fact, and as a mitigating element that reduces a regional coalition against Israel from developing, in part, due to the dependence of the regional states on the West in general and the United States in particular. Consequently, a shift in Israel's standing in Washington and a significant change in American aid to Egypt and Jordan could diminish the importance that regional leaders attribute to the peace agreements with Israel.

Processes of international isolation, erosion of Israel's legitimacy in the international community, and undermining its moral backing would weaken Israel's power in the diplomatic, military, and economic spheres; increase its vulnerability; and could encourage regional forces to act against Israel—whether motivated by ideology or specific interests. Israel's international standing is mainly influenced by its historic relationship with the United States—a relationship that is being challenged today because of a range of intra-American processes, including support for Israel's policies having become a topic of dispute rather than consensus between the Democratic and Republican parties; the rise of new forces that are threatening the historic alliance between Israel and the United States; the focus on “America first” at the expense of the US role in the Middle East; and the weakening of the connection between Israel and American Jewry.

Developments in the international system and in the balance of power between the world powers could also harm Israel's international support. The main threat lies in the weakening of the United States, the strengthening of Russia, and particularly in China's becoming the main competitor of the United States. In certain parameters, especially the economy, China is expected to surpass the United States in the not-too-distant future. The United States is a cornerstone of international support for Israel, and its weakening would immediately affect Israel, given the absence of another global power that is willing and able to take its place.

### ***Support of a global power for an Arab coalition against Israel***

Russia and China are the two main global powers besides the United States. Russia, unlike its precursor the Soviet Union, maintains a balanced relationship with both Israel and the regional states that are hostile to Israel. The most prominent example is Russia's policy in Syria, which demonstrates that Russia acts mainly according to its interests. Currently, it is extremely difficult to imagine a scenario in which Russia would have an interest in joining an Arab coalition aimed at harming Israel. Similarly, China maintains very good relations with Israel, even though it has interests—mainly energy related—requiring it to maintain good relations with both the Arab world and Iran. Moreover, China's foreign policy typically has refrained from aiding or joining forces against another state in regions outside of Southeast Asia, as it does not have any central strategic interest to do so. Consequently, the

probability that China would actively support a regional coalition against Israel is very low, even lower than that of Russia. Before such scenarios could be considered, immense changes would need to occur in the nature and mode of Russia's policies and activities—and certainly of China's.

### ***The disintegration of Israeli society***

Israel society is still considered a cohesive one, with a high level of social solidarity, especially in the face of external threats during times of war and crises. However, the growing societal and political rifts could negatively affect the way that Israel's enemies perceive it. A loss of solidarity involves two main dangers: First, the polarization in Israeli society could intensify and accelerate a brain drain and the transfer of resources outside of Israel, thus weakening its ability to cope with external threats; second, the undermining of Israel's internal cohesion could affect its deterrent reputation in the eyes of its neighbors and could lead to hostile actions against it. In this context, the aspirations of different states in the Middle East to attain the status of regional leadership should be noted, as these countries could see the perceived disintegration of Israeli society as an opportunity.

### ***Unexpected extreme events***

Extreme events could affect some Arab relations with Israel due to the gap between the regimes' pragmatic approach toward Israel and the hostility of significant segments of the public. Consequently, events that could stoke public rage in these states—such as damaging al-Aqsa Mosque or the mass killing of Palestinian civilians, which might be attributed to Israel—could cause friendly Arab regimes to adjust to the public mood and take a more forceful stance toward Israel. In addition, widespread demonstrations along the fence and attempts to penetrate into Israel from the Gaza Strip—if hundreds of thousands of people participate—could pose a serious challenge for Israel, although Israel has proven thus far that it has reasonable technological and military responses to such threats. Even though the toll of coping with these threats could be heavy in terms of both diplomacy and public morale, they do not pose an existential threat. The likelihood that these incidents would immediately lead to the establishment of a regional military coalition against Israel is very low, but they could turn volatile if they are accompanied by serious undermining of Israel's central security pillars (as previously



mentioned) or if they lead to such changes, accelerate them, or catalyze their development.

## **Conclusion and Recommendations**

The situation in the region and in the different states indicates that the likelihood of a regional military coalition against Israel emerging in the foreseeable future is very low, especially without sweeping changes in the regimes and in Israel's relations with the United States. Potential turning points that could shift the current assessment include the possibility of erosion of Israel's qualitative military and technological edge; deterioration of the strategic relationship between Israel and the United States as well as with the pragmatic regimes in the region, and the break down of Israel's social solidarity. Therefore, the following steps should be taken to maintain and strengthen Israel's security pillars vis-à-vis the scenario of a regional coalition against it:

***1. Strengthening the region's pragmatic camp and weakening the radical camp.*** Israel must strive to enhance its strategic relations with Egypt, Jordan, and the Gulf states, and help strengthen the stability of their regimes. Israel has an interest in its neighbors having pragmatic, friendly, and stable regimes that enjoy domestic and international legitimacy. This interest relates mainly to the states that belong to the "stability" camp, mainly Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates. In the short term and medium term, these states do not pose a concrete threat to Israel and sometimes even serve as overt or covert partners in struggles against regional forces that do threaten stability, such as Iran, Hamas, Hezbollah, branches of the Islamic State, and, to a lesser extent, Turkey and Qatar.

At the same time, Israel's influence on the processes of stabilization or destabilization in the Middle East is notably limited for several reasons. The main factors that influence the stability of the region's states are internal (economic, political, ethnic), and Israel's ability to affect them is slight, if not nonexistent. In addition, Israel tends, and justly so, to refrain from using military force in attempts to overthrow or install regimes, especially since its failed attempt in the First Lebanon War. Moreover, Israel has little influence on the relations between Arab regimes and the international community. Consequently, Israel must also continue to prepare for the unwanted and dangerous possibility that pragmatic leaders and regimes might fall, states

will become chaotic, and leaderships supportive of peace will be replaced by hostile ones.

Despite the understanding that Israel has little influence on the processes that endanger the stability of states in the region and its leverage is limited, it can employ several measures: provision of diplomatic support—preferably discreet—in strengthening the legitimacy of pragmatic regimes via its connections in Washington and other capitals around the world; military, security, and intelligence cooperation with the pragmatic regimes against destabilizing elements in their states; provision of material aid as well as knowledge and experts for coping with domestic, economic, and infrastructural challenges that could threaten the stability and public standing of the pragmatic regimes; advancement of an Israeli-Palestinian peace process that would strengthen regional stability, enable regional processes of integration between Israel and its neighbors, strengthen the foundations of peace, and undermine radical ideological and political forces, which are buttressed by the ethos of the struggle against Israel in order to castigate pragmatic regimes and undermine the stability of the region and its states.

Israel should focus on the arenas in which it has the greatest ability to influence; that is, mainly vis-à-vis Jordan and the Palestinian Authority—two relatively small entities that are close to Israel. It is recommended that emphasis should especially be placed on Jordan. The erosion of the standing of the Hashemite royal house in recent years; the economic, social, and demographic challenges that the kingdom faces; the long border shared with Israel; and a significant Palestinian population within Jordan could significantly threaten Israel, but these factors can also be seen as an opportunity. Unlike Egypt, given the relatively small size of Jordan and its problems, Israel can more effectively help improve its stability. As for the Palestinians, Israel's ability to influence that arena is even greater. Israel can affect their balance of motivations in the military, economic, and diplomatic spheres. It can also influence Palestinian political developments by strengthening “positive” (moderate) Palestinian elements while working against “negative” (extremist) ones.

As for Saudi Arabia, its regional and domestic difficulties should dampen Israel's enthusiasm for the regional perspectives that tout Riyadh as the backbone of the Sunni camp, which—alongside Israel—is taking on Iran and is seen also as being able to help advance a breakthrough in the diplomatic

process with the Palestinians. All scenarios that undermine the Saudi regime are negative for Israel. The possibility that the kingdom will become a failed state or be ruled by a hostile regime would endanger the US position in the Middle East and subsequently harm Israel. Furthermore, it is feared that Saudi Arabia's advanced weapons would reach hostile forces, which then would direct them against Israel. Beyond the possible harm to the limited cooperation between Israel and Saudi Arabia, the undermining of the kingdom's stability would send shockwaves that could affect stable regimes, mainly those of Jordan and Egypt, in which Israel has an interest in their preservation. In addition, the more vulnerable the Saudi kingdom is internally, the less capable it will be of publicly cooperating with Israel, if only because it will seek to appease the different groups that criticize its relations with Israel and could challenge its stability. In the scenario of an internal coup, assuming that the kingdom is still ruled by a regime that operates according to the rules of *realpolitik*, the objective interest of cooperation with Israel would likely be maintained. Therefore, Israel and the Western states must ask themselves what should be done to help the Saudi royal house survive, and how should they operate if Saudi Arabia is weakened and becomes a less significant actor in the pragmatic camp facing Iran.

In addition to strengthening the regimes in the pragmatic "stability" camp, Israel must continue its campaign to weaken the military buildup of the radical camp (Iran, Syria, Hezbollah, and Hamas) and work to reduce Turkey's influence in the region. It should be noted, however, that unequivocally stating that Turkey is an "enemy state" is not beneficial, and allocating resources to the struggle against it should be done with extreme caution so that the damage of such an action does not outweigh its benefit. As long as Turkey does not become an active enemy of Israel, the emphasis needs to be on preventing any escalating hostility between the two states. Israel can strengthen alliances with other states in the eastern Mediterranean basin, especially Greece and Cyprus, but not at the expense of relations with Turkey. Furthermore, Israel does not need to express hostile intentions toward Turkey; rather, Israel should create deterrence against Ankara and prepare the ground for coordination and cooperation should Turkey manifest aggression toward Israel.

**2. Improving Israel's regional standing.** Israel must work to strengthen its significance and utility as an ally to the regional states, improve its image

among the populations in the neighboring Arab states—especially Egypt and Jordan—and emphasize the fruits of peaceful relations with it. Israel can do this by improving its public diplomacy vis-à-vis the public opinion in the Arab states and by striving to enhance and expand normalization and cooperation in the military, economic, technological, infrastructural, and environmental spheres. Israel would do well in successfully changing its branding from being a regional “threat” to an “asset,” and it should allocate dedicated resources for this. Israel can help provide solutions to regional problems, thanks to its soft power on shared issues, such as water technologies, desert agriculture, renewable energy, employment, health, science, and innovation. A peace that is mainly conducted between leaderships and armies and does not have strong popular and civilian foundations will have eventually difficulty surviving crises, revolutions, and changes of regimes and rulers. Advancing a solution to the Palestinian problem, if possible, is likely to greatly contribute to reducing the traditional hostility in the Middle East toward Israel and to advancing normalization with greater legitimacy, while weakening popular and institutional motivations for engaging in military action against Israel.

**3. *Steps for preparing for extreme events.*** Israel should improve the protection of religious holy sites, especially the al-Aqsa Mosque and its compound; form a strategic diplomatic umbrella that includes regional elements; and create shared protection mechanisms between Israel and the Arab and Islamic states for these sites. Israel should prioritize the fight against terrorism, including Jewish terrorism; refine military procedures that help minimize killings of uninvolved citizens as part of the asymmetric fight against Palestinian terrorism and Hezbollah; and create permanent steering committees that are responsible for predicting extreme events, preparing for them, and preventing them.

**4. *Fostering the bipartisan relationship with the United States***—in accordance with the recommendations in chapter 4.

**5. *Fostering Israel’s internal resilience and fostering the social solidarity*** of its residents—in accordance with the recommendations in chapter 5.

## Notes

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# Toward a Nuclear Middle East

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Yoel Guzansky and Ron Tira

In recent years, the Iranian nuclear project has been at the center of the world's attention and has motivated other states to take the nuclear path. Indeed, countries from Turkey and Saudi Arabia to Egypt and the United Arab Emirates are developing nuclear infrastructure and know-how without a possible military dimension (PMD) as far as we know. Of course, Iran's progress toward nuclear weapons could accelerate these processes and increase the incentive to give these projects a military dimension. While significant research has focused on the nuclearization of Iran and the threat it poses, less attention has been given to the formation of a multipolar regional nuclear system, the inherent risks, and the challenges involved in maintaining nuclear balance. The purpose of this chapter is to analyze the risks inherent in a multipolar regional nuclear system; to review the current nuclear situation in the Middle East; to recognize the accelerating and inhibiting factors in the region's nuclearization; to identify possible trends of nuclearization that have military dimension; and to recommend an Israeli strategy to counter this threat.

## **Background: The Implications of a Multipolar Regional Nuclear System**

In the absence of precedents for a multipolar, regional nuclear system, any analysis is inherently challenging. Moreover, it is unlikely that the theories and concepts that developed about the nuclear issue during and following

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the Cold War would be applicable in the Middle East. The most significant conceptualization during the Cold War revolved around the doctrine of mutually assured destruction (MAD), which relied on the survivability of the nuclear attack capability in order to carry out a second strike after having suffered a first strike. This sustainability was ensured in two ways: First, the superpowers had numerical redundancy. At the height of the Cold War, the two superpowers possessed tens of thousands of nuclear warheads. Second, they had platforms that were highly survivable, such as deep-water nuclear submarines that could remain under the arctic ice cap; a fleet of bombers that could remain airborne for a long period; and surface-to-surface missiles that were silo-protected or mobile. This ensured the adversary's intelligence was not able to locate all of the enemy's existing platforms at any moment, and even when a platform was located, it was sometimes difficult to destroy.

During the Cold War, the United States and the Soviet Union defined additional conditions necessary for enabling second-strike capability. First, the adversarial sides had to have some geographic distance between them. The Cuban missile crisis in 1962 resulted, in part, from the fact that the stationing of Soviet ballistic missiles with nuclear warheads in geographically close proximity to the United States could have shortened the warning time and limited the American second-strike capability (at least in terms of command, control, and retaliation from the territory of the United States itself). Second, they had to be capable of identifying an attack in advance. In the case of the superpowers, only the massive launching of thousands of nuclear weapons could have brought about the destruction of the adversary's nuclear capabilities, and this kind of volley would have had a high signature, allowing for advanced warning.

In the case of a multipolar regional nuclear system, however, it is doubtful whether the concepts of the Cold War are even relevant. Each regional player likely would amass a modest number of nuclear weapons, especially in the first few years of nuclearization, and it is improbable that they would possess platforms such as nuclear submarines loitering under the arctic ice cap or a fleet of bombers continuously in the air. Therefore, it might be possible to track the enemy's weapons and destroy them in a first strike, thus denying the enemy the ability to carry out a second strike. Under these circumstances, the option of a nuclear attack becomes a rational decision. In addition, the regional players are geographically closer and sometimes border one another;



thus, attacking a small number of nearby strategic sites could be possible without giving an early warning and enabling the adversary to respond.

During the Cold War years, theoretical models developed by the Rand Corporation, Thomas Schelling, and others served as a substitute for the lack of actual experience with nuclear crises.<sup>1</sup> Borrowing from these models, we can present a model in which states A and B each possess two nuclear bombs that are each stored in a bunker in the heartland of the two states. In this situation, it is possible to locate the bunkers where the two adversarial states store their two bombs, as well as attack the bunkers. Here, the use of nuclear weapons for a first strike on the bunker of the adversarial state could be considered a rational act. In addition, each of the two states may fear that the other has already located or is about to locate the bunker in which its nuclear weapon is stored, leading both to rationally conclude that they must preemptively attack the adversary's bunker before the adversary does. This creates a dynamic, which as stated, is completely rational, of accelerating the nuclear escalation.

The situation is even more complicated in a multipolar system, as it is more difficult to create situational awareness and to analyze the strategy of each player against the others, thus increasing the potential for errors. Due to the difficulties in creating situational awareness, there is a fear that a bipolar nuclear event could develop into a multipolar nuclear crisis. Some of the Middle Eastern players do not yet have systems that can be adapted for nuclear command and control, and it is not clear how fortitudinous the political leadership can be in supervising the exercise of military force. In addition, the regional states do not have any credible and institutionalized channels of communication through which they could manage nuclear crises. Furthermore, there is a tangible danger that the collapse of a regime or state could cause components of its nuclear weapons to fall into the hands of various radical sub-state organizations. Moreover, a nuclear attack does not have to come from the territory of the aggressor state but could rather come from the territory of a failed state or via a sub-state proxy. These characteristics do not fit the Cold War's nuclear models and produce a dangerous and complex reality that is much more difficult to manage.

Given how Iran handles its affairs, it is doubtful whether it is a natural candidate for a paradigmatic nuclear partnership with its adversaries like the one that existed between the United States and the Soviet Union during the

Cold War. As a rule, Iran is unlikely to view nuclear weapons as an all-or-nothing measure. Its natural tendency is to create obfuscated gray situations, to exercise brinkmanship, to defy on the one hand and give in on the other. This great “creativity” characterizes Iran’s strategy, and Iran could find ways to leverage the power of extortion in nuclear and sub-nuclear crises, including turning its nuclear capabilities into a protective shield behind which it could carry out subversive activity or conventional warfare.

### **The Region’s States and the Nuclearization Process: A Situation Assessment**

In October 2015, Iran began to implement the nuclear deal that it had signed with the world powers; in the spring of 2019, however, it began to gradually and unilaterally erode the restrictions that had been imposed upon it according to the agreement. Iran’s violations of nuclear limitations in the JCPOA continued and its stock of low enriched uranium grew to 2324.9 kilograms of low enriched uranium enriched below 5 percent. As a result its breakout timelines decreased slightly to an average of 3.5 months, with a minimum of at least 3.1 months.<sup>2</sup>

Saudi Arabia feels threatened by Iran’s nuclear project. Given this position as well as its considerable financial resources, Saudi Arabia is the leading Arab candidate for developing a nuclear program with possible military dimensions. In addition, the kingdom has long declared its intention to develop a nuclear program for peaceful purposes, and it is preparing to implement this decision. Among other things, in the spring of 2019, it was reported that the kingdom had acquired a small research reactor made in Argentina and that it is in advanced stages of construction at a site near Riyadh. In parallel, Saudi Arabia would like to build nuclear power plants for producing electricity, is negotiating with the United States in order to receive assistance for civilian nuclear development, and is working to erode the taboo against enriching uranium.<sup>3</sup> In this context, Saudi Arabia’s energy minister, Abdulaziz bin Salman, said at a conference in Abu Dhabi in September 2019 that the kingdom is interested in controlling all the components of the nuclear fuel cycle, including the enrichment of uranium.<sup>4</sup> The United States, for its part, demands that the kingdom sign a comprehensive supervision agreement with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and even adopt the additional protocols of the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation on Nuclear

Weapons so that Congress will be able to approve the 123 Agreement for nuclear cooperation between the two countries, which is named after Section 123 of the US Atomic Energy Act of 1954.<sup>5</sup> Over the years, and since the signing of the nuclear deal with Iran, senior officials in the kingdom have spoken out against Iran's attaining nuclear weapons. The Saudi crown prince, Mohammad bin Salman, explicitly and publicly clarified the implications for Saudi Arabia during a visit to the United States in the spring of 2018. In an interview, he declared that "Saudi Arabia does not want to attain a nuclear bomb, but there is no doubt that if Iran develops a nuclear bomb, we will attain a nuclear bomb as soon as possible."<sup>6</sup>

In the past, there were reports of possible military nuclear cooperation between Saudi Arabia and Pakistan, while an Iranian nuclear breakout likely would increase Saudi pressure on Pakistan to provide it with immediate nuclear reassurances. In such a case, the repositioning of Pakistani nuclear weapons within Saudi Arabia—under Pakistani command—is more likely than the transfer of nuclear warheads from Pakistan directly to Saudi possession and control. Concerns over Riyadh's nuclear intentions increased at the end of 2018, with the disclosure of a facility for producing surface-to-surface missiles, the first of its kind in the kingdom, which seems to have been built with Pakistani and/or Chinese assistance. The site, in the southwest of Riyadh, is similar to one that China built northwest of Islamabad.<sup>7</sup>

Turkey is developing a significant civilian nuclear program for the construction of some twenty electricity reactors by 2030 and will receive assistance from foreign companies at least for building the first few reactors.<sup>8</sup> In 2010, Turkey signed a deal with the Russian government corporation Rosatom for the construction of a power plant consisting of four units, each generating a capacity of 1,200 megawatts of electricity. The deal cost twenty billion dollars, and it includes light-water reactors, which are supposed to begin operating in 2023—a three-year delay in regards to the original plan.<sup>9</sup> Turkey does not have known plans to enrich uranium or process plutonium, but Prime Minister Erdoğan declared that his country retains the right to do so.<sup>10</sup>

Egypt has also been pursuing a civilian nuclear program. This program includes two research reactors located at the nuclear research center at Inshas. For many years Egypt has discussed the possibility of building nuclear power plants, and in recent years it even signed agreements in principle with Russia

for supplying reactors. The laying of the cornerstone for the construction at El Dabaa is planned for 2020. Presidents Anwar Sadat and Hosni Mubarak decided not to pursue military nuclear development, although not all Egyptian officials agreed with this decision.<sup>11</sup> During one of its routine visits to Egypt in 2009, the IAEA discovered highly enriched uranium particles; however, Egypt did not have a satisfactory explanation.<sup>12</sup> Egypt also has refused to sign the “Additional Protocol” of the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT)—a step which would allow the IAEA to conduct more precise testing on its territory. Over the years, within international forums, Egypt has called for making the Middle East a nuclear-weapons-free zone—directed mainly at Israel. Egypt has been less involved in this in recent years, as it may understand that its activity in this area has encountered significant obstacles and has not yielded any real results.

The United Arab Emirates (UAE) is the most advanced state in the Arab world in terms of civilian nuclear development. In 2018, the UAE completed the construction of the first of four nuclear reactors; when it is operational, the UAE will be the first Arab state operating a civilian nuclear program. The UAE claims that it needs nuclear energy in order to catch up with its increasing energy needs and to reduce its dependence on oil, so that it can export more of the oil it produces. In order to alleviate international concerns about its nuclear intentions—as part of a 123 Cooperation Agreement with the United States—the UAE committed in 2009 to not enriching uranium or to processing plutonium. This threshold was set as the regime’s “gold standard” for preventing nuclear proliferation, and the agreement opened the door for the UAE to engage in international nuclear cooperation and to accelerate its nuclear program.

The nuclear deal between the world powers and Iran could place the UAE in an inferior position. The agreement it signed with Washington is less beneficial, as it provides a much narrower leeway than in the agreement signed with Iran. For this reason, some Arab governments criticized the UAE for adhering to the 123 Agreement.<sup>13</sup> After signing the deal with Iran, the UAE’s ambassador in Washington, Yousef Al Otaiba, insinuated that the UAE might reconsider its position regarding the enrichment of uranium and may not continue to see itself obligated by the nuclear cooperation agreement that it signed with the United States.<sup>14</sup>

Jordan also conducted negotiations on a civilian nuclear cooperation agreement with the United States, but these negotiations did not progress due to its insistence on not relinquishing the option of enriching uranium. The kingdom aspires to start a nuclear program for producing electricity within its territory though this aspiration is suffering from significant economic and political difficulties. Jordan's increasing demand for energy, its lack of oil reserves (some 90 percent of its energy consumption is imported), the prolonged disruption in the past to both the supply of oil from Iraq and natural gas from Egypt, as well as the presence of significant uranium deposits in its territory have compelled the kingdom to strive for civilian nuclear capability in cooperation with Russia.

Syria, it appears, still retains an extremely limited civilian nuclear capability. This is under the restricted supervision of the IAEA, as Syria has not signed the "Additional Protocol." With North Korea's assistance, Syria secretly constructed a nuclear reactor intended for military purposes, which was destroyed by Israel in 2007. The media has reported that Bashar al-Assad has not completely given up on Syria's nuclear program, although there has been no official confirmation of this.<sup>15</sup>

The above shows that the regional players have chosen to take different nuclearization paths—some more concerning than others. It is important to distinguish between nuclearization steps that affect Israel's set of strategic considerations and those that do not influence these considerations. For example, the development of nuclear weapons or the construction of nuclear facilities with a possible military dimension or the attainment of nuclear weapons from a third party should be differentiated from a civilian nuclear power plant. A civilian nuclear power plant that is based on a 123 Agreement; is constructed and operated by an international contractor; whose fuel is provided from an external source; is subject to IAEA supervision with the most stringent standards; and does not have potential military dimensions nor enables a significant transfer of knowledge is, of course, a lesser concern. However, we cannot ignore the fact that even civilian nuclearization paths lacking immediate military dimensions gradually create a new regional reality edging toward the proliferation of nuclear infrastructure, in which nuclear knowledge and competencies becomes more common, and step-by-step, the nuclear taboo is broken down.

## The Nuclearization Paths

The Middle East countries has several possible paths to nuclearization. The most common is implementing research projects or constructing reactors for the production of electricity; both lack military dimensions and are carried out under the mantle of international legitimacy. These projects are undertaken mainly because of regional prestige and standing that accompany nuclear development and for the desire to build a basis of knowledge and to train technological personnel in the field. Due to this pursuit for nuclear development, we must not discount the possibility of a low-key civilian nuclear race.

Receiving a nuclear reassurance from a country such as the United States is one nuclear path that does not raise much concern. The experience of the Cold War, however, shows that written reassurances were not considered credible enough, and additional guarantees were needed, such as the prepositioning of American troops or American nuclear weapons within the borders of the states that received the reassurance. If the United States would demonstrate this kind of commitment while considering the sensitivities of each state (especially the Arabian Peninsula, where the stationing of non-Muslim forces can be a sensitive issue), it is possible that certain states would settle for this. In the past, the United States has used a physical guarantee to successfully reassure, at least partially, its allies Japan and South Korea from the threats inherent in the proliferation of nuclear weapons in Asia.

In the case of Saudi Arabia, a US nuclear umbrella of protection over the years has been considered preferable to its independently striving for military nuclear weapon. Nonetheless, Iran's nuclear weapons could have consequences on the Saudi kingdom's security, in addition to the increasing Saudi concern about the willingness of the United States to continue providing it with military backing in the face of Iranian aggression. In Turkey's case as well, it is not clear how willing it is to depend upon the United States in the long term. Turkey's acquisition of the S-400 air defense system produced by Russia (after which the United States suspended Ankara's participation in the F-35 program) suggests that Turkey does not have any level of trust toward the United States and its other NATO allies.

As for Egypt, several developments could cause concern. First, Egypt might want to move from a civilian nuclear program to a military one for several reasons. Egypt has a traditional national security doctrine, according

to which stable peace is based on military force and requires developing elements of power, especially given that Israel is still perceived as a reference threat—despite the peace agreement—and given Israel’s image as a nuclear state. Egypt also has ambitions to restore its standing as the region’s leader by attaining nuclear weapons capability. Egypt also subscribes to the view that possessing nuclear weapons will guarantee the stability of its regime, while the possible collapse of the nuclear deal with Iran could ignite a regional nuclear arms race.

Second, the external involvement mainly of Russia in the construction of the nuclear power plant at El Dabaa and in improving Egypt’s nuclear science infrastructure is worrisome. This cooperation with Russia is part of Abdel Fattah el-Sisi’s policy to diversify Egypt’s sources of support in terms of its arms procurement, which renders Egyptian-Russian military cooperation possible in the nuclear field as well. Furthermore, the current regime’s political and economic challenges could make it easier for external players—Russian, Saudi, and others—to gain a foothold in Egypt. Cooperation between Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE in the nuclear field could magnify the shared knowledge, funding, and motivation vis-à-vis regional adversaries. In addition, reports have circulated about the existence of military ties between Egypt and North Korea and between the latter and the UAE, which could be expressed in pursuing a secret military nuclear program like the one built previously in Syria.

A third concern is Egypt’s easing of diplomatic efforts to prevent the proliferation of nuclear weapons in the Middle East. While the construction of nuclear power plants for peaceful purposes at El Dabaa does not—at least for now—deviate from Cairo’s traditional declarations about promoting a Middle East free of nuclear weapons, Egyptian diplomacy in recent years has notably stopped calling on Israel to sign the NPT. While this trend could reflect improved relations between Egypt and Israel, it could also reflect Egypt’s understanding that there is no point in pursuing its previous policy as well as its decision to choose alternative ways of addressing Israel’s nuclear superiority, such as by pursuing its own military nuclear project.

Another path to nuclearization is requesting nuclear reassurances or a weapon from a third party that is not a superpower. For example, a special relationship has developed between Saudi Arabia and Pakistan. Saudi Arabia sees Pakistan as both a strategic hinterland and an important asset in restraining

Iranian influence, as well as fulfilling a need for a strategic ally that is not Arab. In return, Pakistan enjoys a relatively reliable economic mainstay, influence in the Gulf arena, and even a role in protecting the holy places of Islam. Although Riyadh and Islamabad have had disputes in recent years, especially when it comes to Saudi military involvement in Yemen (since March 2015), they have succeeded in overcoming them and in deepening their special relationship. If an Iranian nuclear breakout does occur, Saudi Arabia would increase its pressure on Pakistan to supply it with immediate nuclear reassurances. What is included in these nuclear reassurances and to the extent that Saudi Arabia would be willing to place its security solely in the hands of Pakistan are both unknown. Moreover, the United States likely would exert pressure on both Pakistan and Saudi Arabia to prevent them from strengthening their nuclear cooperation.

The nuclearization path that represents the highest level of escalation is the development of a nuclear project that has military dimensions, including the production of plutonium or enrichment of uranium and ultimately weaponization and the development of platforms that are capable of carrying weapons (such as surface-to-surface missiles). We must not discount the possibility of attaining nuclear weapons from third parties. It should be noted that at the time of this writing, we are not aware of a military nuclear effort in any one of the above-mentioned states except Iran.

### **Catalysts and Inhibitors of the Nuclearization Processes**

The main catalyst of a nuclearization process of states in the Middle East is the nuclearization of their neighbors. This is due to the nuclear threat itself, the increased weight of sub-nuclear military threats under the umbrella of a nuclear threat, and considerations of hegemony and prestige. Iran is leading the nuclearization process, which could cause other regional players to accelerate their nuclear programs. Saudi Arabia feels especially threatened by Iran's nuclear program. If Saudi Arabia believes that Iran is advancing in its nuclear program and certainly if it declares that it has attained military nuclear capability or conducts nuclear testing, then the kingdom could utilize all its economic resources and mobilize a nuclear response to the growing Iranian threat in a relatively short amount of time.

The United States is the only country that can provide an effective nuclear umbrella to the Saudi kingdom, and this is well understood in Riyadh. Despite



the lack of an official alliance, the United States and Saudi Arabia have significant security relations. Nonetheless, Saudi Arabia harbors a growing mistrust toward the level of American political and military support for it. The source of this mistrust is the attitude that both the Obama and Trump administrations have shown toward Saudi Arabia. This is the context for the formation of the special relationship mentioned earlier between Saudi Arabia and Pakistan, which may include secret nuclear understandings, and is based, in part, on Pakistan's extensive, proven military nuclear capability.

Iranian nuclearization—certainly if Saudi Arabia follows suit—would pose a dilemma for Turkey in terms of its response, if only for reasons of prestige. In a speech given in Ankara in May 2018, Turkish president, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, declared that the main threats to his country and to the region are nuclear weapons.<sup>16</sup> In a speech delivered in September 2019, he criticized the countries with military nuclear capability for preventing Turkey from also arming itself with missiles that can carry nuclear warheads and said that he does not accept this.<sup>17</sup> Turkey opposed the United States' decision to withdraw from the nuclear deal with Iran and impose sanctions on it, mainly because of its dependency upon energy imports from Iran. Although Turkey is a signatory to the NPT and the "Additional Protocol" and enjoys NATO's nuclear umbrella, the tensions between Turkey and its fellow NATO members could spur it to take an independent nuclear path.

The assumption that a nuclear Iran poses an equal threat to both Saudi Arabia and Turkey can be challenged. Iran and Turkey have disputes, and the tension between them sets the stage for the mutual threats that are made at times, but over the years the two countries have been able to maintain a more or less quiet border between them. In addition, as the international sanctions imposed on Iran for its nuclear program continue, Iran's dependence on economic relations with Turkey—allowing it to bypass at least some of the sanctions—will persist and perhaps even increase.

Egypt's regional leadership ambitions—even if they have been placed on the back burner as Egypt focuses on its serious domestic challenges—as well as its concerns over Iran's military buildup and the advancement of its nuclear program could drive Egypt to acquire military nuclear capability. Currently, Egypt is far from being able to produce nuclear weapons on its own, despite having a significant reservoir of Egyptian nuclear scientists and engineers. Egypt emphasizes that its energy needs justify its aspirations

for a nuclear program, but, as already stated, what could push it toward nuclear development for military purposes—even if not immediately—is its regional significance and that Egypt traditionally sees itself as the leader of the Arab world.

From a broader perspective, there are several factors that restrain and inhibit the region's states on the path to nuclearization. The primary factor is the stance of the world powers, mainly the United States and Russia, which thus far have worked to block and curb the proliferation of nuclear weapons—even if they have not always been effective. Although the world powers' firm stand, backed by a definitive and credible strategy, could be an inhibiting factor in the nuclearization process, currently it is not the case. The existence of coherent and tight political blocs of client states in the region and of world powers reduces the incentives of these states to aspire to nuclearization, and it also renders the world powers' opposition more effective. The strategic credibility of the world powers, which is based mainly on demonstrating commitment to their allies, also influences the regional nuclearization trends.

The world powers and the international community adhere to the NPT regime, despite incidents in which it has been violated. Just as the NPT regime did not collapse after North Korea attained nuclear capability, and just as nuclear proliferation in northeast Asia did not expand, Iran's becoming a nuclear power will not necessarily lead to the collapse of the NPT regime, especially since the majority of countries in the world are interested in maintaining it. Therefore, we can speculate that the difficulties and political costs involved in the development of military nuclear capability may continue to deter Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Egypt from choosing this option. But if Iran crosses the nuclear threshold, the ability of the international community to oppose additional countries from obtaining nuclear capability will diminish significantly.

Of course, one of the restraining factors is also the economic costs, the technical complexity, and the knowledge barrier that a country must overcome in order to implement a nuclear program that has military dimensions. Achieving nuclear capability possible military dimensions involves a more prolonged effort than in the past, and many barriers stand in the way of states that seek to attain independent nuclear capability. Egypt has the necessary some knowledge and infrastructure, but its economic problems diminish its

chances of pursuing such an expensive project in the short term. Saudi Arabia is strategically motivated to create a nuclear response to Iran's nuclearization and has the requisite economic resources; Saudi Arabia, however, suffers from a lack of skilled local personnel, and whether it would be able to import external personnel that would assist it in advancing such a project is questionable. As for Turkey, it seems to have the necessary economic capability as well as human resources for the purpose of pursuing nuclear capability; however, its nuclear infrastructure is rudimentary, and the training of personnel necessary to advance a nuclear program there could take a long time. Furthermore, since the failed coup attempt in July 2016, Turkey has had to cope with the increased emigration of scientists.<sup>18</sup>

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

Israel considers preventing the development of a regional nuclear threat as a primary strategic objective. The prevention strategy that Israel has implemented for the past few decades (at least since 1981) is aimed at enemy states (Iraq, Syria, and Iran) and combines covert and overt measures, including diplomatic and, if necessary, also military-kinetic means. Nonetheless, several basic facts have changed since this strategy, known as the Begin Doctrine, was first formulated. First, Israel's international standing has strengthened, and today it can rely on international measures more successfully than it could in the past. Second, the reference scenario could change. If Iran pursues a path of nuclearization, after which military nuclear projects also begin in Saudi Arabia, Egypt, or Turkey, then the scope of the challenge could require new measures that differ from the traditional ones of the Begin Doctrine. Consequently, from the outset, Israel must work to prevent the emergence of this threat profile. Third, Israel's relations with the Arab world have shifted as some of the Arab states have become its allies (overtly or covertly), while the main threat reference is now Iranian and not Arab.

Israel has an interest in preventing nuclearization with possible military dimensions even in states that have an overt or covert strategic partnership with it, out of concern that their orientation could change; their policy could reverse (for example in the case of the fall of a regime); or that the nuclearization of one state will encourage other states in the region to follow suit. Improving relations with these states could reduce the dynamics of a nuclear arms race. In this context, Israel should examine in depth whether

the Begin Doctrine is still relevant to Arab states that are allied with the West. Preventing the nuclearization of enemies requires comprehensive prevention—of both allies and adversaries—in order to prevent a nuclear arms race in the first place. Israel’s intelligence should pay attention to the regional cooperation in this field, especially in the development of networks of nuclear assistance. For example, countries such as Egypt and Pakistan have a considerable number of nuclear scientists, while the Gulf States, which launched their own nuclear programs long ago, can provide funding for nuclear projects. Ultimately, it is important to remember that a multilateral nuclear system is unstable and could escalate into a multilateral nuclear crisis that could involve Israel, even if the crisis does not begin bilaterally between Israel and a nuclear state in the region.

Preventing the nuclearization of states that are not enemies is a complex issue. While any prevention strategy ultimately could include a kinetic effort, halting the nuclearization of a friendly state requires many prior and additional endeavors, including the exposition of the nuclear effort. Preventing the nuclearization of Iran understandably would reduce the motivation of players such as Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Turkey from pursuing the path of nuclearization. That is, by preventing the nuclearization of its adversaries, Israel could prevent the nuclearization of some players who are not enemies, and vice versa. In this respect, the nuclear efforts in Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Turkey might not contribute to the efforts to halt Iran’s nuclear program; rather, they increase Iran’s motivation to continue its nuclear program.

Israel can also try to influence the United States to provide a nuclear umbrella, if needed, to countries such as Saudi Arabia, as it has a clear interest in fostering trust in the relations between the United States and Saudi Arabia. For Israel’s sake, it is, of course, preferable that the United States—and not Pakistan—provide the nuclear umbrella. From Israel’s perspective, it is certainly desirable that Saudi Arabia does not receive nuclear weapons from Pakistan or from any other source. In addition, Israel has an interest in Turkey’s remaining within the framework of NATO. Consequently, from Israel’s perspective, working to promote the deep and credible involvement of the United States in the Middle East is considered the right approach, as it serves as a barrier to nuclearization.

As for the time frame for the threat’s materialization, these are long-term projects that are affected by various catalysts and inhibitors. Those

who are close to completing nuclear projects—such as the UAE, which will inaugurate its reactors in the near future—are not a threat to Israel, as long as they retain their current dimensions. Nonetheless, even though the time frame for completing nuclear projects is long, the possibility that one of Israel’s neighbors will attain operational military nuclear capability is a severe threat that requires ongoing monitoring and the appropriate allocation of resources.

Simultaneously, Israel needs to consider whether it should acquiesce to neighboring nuclear programs that do not have a military dimension but rather are meant for prestige and for discharging political pressures. To a large extent, this is a moot point, as several large-scale civilian nuclear programs have already been undertaken in the Middle East in recent years.

Israel can also provide a strategic hinterland, based partially on intelligence and missile defense, to the Arab states that feel threatened by Iran. Any prevention strategy against those who are adversaries and those who are obviously not should utilize non-kinetic measures, including recruiting the support of the international community in general and the United States in particular, pursuing sanctions, intelligence exposures, and cyber warfare.

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# A Multi-Arena Missile Attack that Disrupts Israel's Defense and Resilience Pillars

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Udi Dekel

The primary and most severe conventional military threat facing Israel today is a missile attack and aerial munitions aimed at strategic targets—civilian and military—deep inside Israeli territory. Given the adversaries' buildup of attack capabilities, Israel's defense establishment has formulated a comprehensive defense doctrine, which should provide an effective, resilient, and continuous response to any threat—strategic or tactical—to the State of Israel. The threat profile described in this chapter is based on the current trends in developing attack capabilities among Israel's enemy states, mainly Iran and its proxies, and it could escalate, due to a situation in which the Israeli defense system is not prepared and has exhausted its capabilities.

## **Background: The Growing Threat of Precision Capabilities and its Implications**

In recent years, the technological and military capabilities of Israel's conceivable adversaries, whether states, such as Iran and Syria, or terrorist armies, such as Hezbollah, Hamas, Islamic Jihad, and Shiite militias (the latter in the northern arena), have undergone tremendous change. In addition to having non-precision missiles, surface-to-surface rockets, and missile systems, they have developed and are now employing advanced technological capabilities, which improve the precision capabilities of the weapons aimed at Israel.

Two processes have accelerated this trend. First, the existence of advanced technology that is accessible, available, and cheap enables the installing of advanced precision capabilities into an array of attack weapons: ballistic

missiles, cruise missiles, precision coast-to-sea missiles, tactical surface-to-surface missiles, surface-to-surface rockets, unmanned aerial attack vehicles (UAVs), smart bombs launched from the air, precision-guided missiles launched from the ground, and more. Second, the operational experience acquired by Iran and its proxies in the fighting in Syria, Iraq, and Yemen and having to defend against Israeli aerial attacks in the ongoing campaign in Syria below the threshold of war—known as a “confrontation between the wars”—accelerated the development of the adversaries’ offensive capabilities as well as their protective and defensive capabilities. Operational experience has proven beyond all doubt that using precision weapons, guided or autonomous, are advantageous, alongside employing advanced air-defense systems that can intercept both launch platforms and precision-guided munitions (which Israel possesses) that are launched from the air or from the ground.

The significance of this “precision revolution” is a dramatic change in the future battlefield. Firing several precision-guided missiles is much more effective than the indiscriminate firing of dozens or hundreds of artillery rockets and missiles. The adversary’s ability to achieve an image of victory, following damage to strategic sites or to symbols of government within the State of Israel could create a new “balance of horror.” Precisely hitting strategic sites or infrastructure would have destructive consequences on the continuity of functioning of Israel’s military during wartime, on Israel’s economic resilience, and on the sense of security and social resilience among its citizens. Israel has worked hard to prepare its air defense system and the Israeli home front for the strategic change of this threat, but creating the response is insufficient. The state avoids exposing the enormity of the risk in order to maintain deterrence, to sustain the public routine and daily life, and to preserve the calm during normal times. Nonetheless, Israel must win the competition with its adversaries in their development of attack and disruption capabilities and in its own response in both the offensive and defensive spheres. In addition, Israel has to prevent its adversaries from building up their capabilities, which reduce their motivation to implement the threat and diminish Israel’s relative advantage.

While Israel has invested considerable resources during the past three decades in developing a multi-layer air defense system, its adversaries have monitored the development of Israel’s capabilities and are attempting



to outmaneuver and overpower the IDF's air defense systems by eroding them on three levels:

1. Saturation—firing salvoes of rockets/missiles at the same time from different arenas
2. Technological innovation—acquiring missiles with multi-projectile warheads, cruise missiles, autonomous munitions, attack drone swarms, and so forth
3. Staying power—acquiring tens of thousands of missiles, rockets, and UAVs that are launched in continual barrages over many days of fighting.

The adversaries' increasing acquisition of a large quantity and array of offensive weapons make it difficult for Israel's air defense system to function effectively, to discover the trajectories of the most threatening munitions, and to intercept them. Combined barrages would make it difficult to distinguish between precision-guided missiles and other missiles and rockets, and by saturating the salvoes, Israel's adversaries could try to deplete the Israel's stock of intercepting missiles in the early stages of the war. Consequently, in practice, there is already an arms race between the adversarial attacker and Israel as the defender—in which Israel starts off in an inferior position for two reasons. First is the gap in costs. The development and production of missiles and rockets is much cheaper in the grand scheme than the development and production of air defense systems and interceptors. The second reason, which heavily influences the first, is the gap in the level of sophistication between the various threats and the technological demands of building interception systems. In addition, the capabilities being developed by the world powers—especially Russia—must be considered, such as hypersonic, cruise and ballistic missiles with trajectories that are difficult to predict in advance, making them difficult to intercept. These could ultimately also reach our region.

### **The Technological-Operational Response**

The response to these developing threats is in constant competition with the buildup of the adversaries' offensive capabilities. As written in an article in the Israeli military journal *Maarachot*, the defense technologies and development programs of all air defense systems are extremely complex. Given their sophistication and cost, they place a heavy burden on the defense budget and take resources away from developing offensive capabilities and

from building up the maneuvering land power, both which are essential for quickly defeating the enemy on the battlefield. The defense industries, which believe in the development, are at the forefront of global technology in their fields. Nevertheless, currently, all the interception systems are based on a similar principle of kinetic interception, which is achieved either by the interceptor precisely hitting the target or by passing close to the target and destroying it with a timed explosion that hits its warhead. Regardless, ensuring the success of kinetic interception requires the development of functioning, sophisticated, and expensive interceptors and ground control systems that are completely immune to disruptions and cyberattacks.<sup>1</sup>

Israel has developed a multi-layered air defense system. Each weapons system initially aims to counter a different group of threats: The Iron Dome was developed against short-range rockets; the David's Sling was developed against medium-range rockets and missiles, including cruise missiles; and the Arrow System developed against medium- and long-range ballistic missiles launched toward Israel from distant countries. This is how the most basic level of multi-layered defense is built, with each weapon that could be launched at Israel having a designated response. However, this approach does not provide an effective response to the diverse advanced threats, especially in a combat environment that has multiple and various munitions, attacking simultaneously from different arenas. In addition, it does not fully utilize the capabilities of the air defense system.<sup>2</sup> Israel also has improved attack capabilities, which can accurately strike the adversary's launch systems and destroy its command and control systems. To this end, accurate and relevant intelligence is essential for operations, in addition to functioning and undisturbed control systems that properly utilize the IDF's offensive capabilities.

### **The Threat Profile**

The threat profile presents an extreme scenario that is intended to highlight the vulnerabilities of the Israeli response. The basic assumption is that Israel's enemies, especially Iran, are aware of Israel's vulnerabilities and gaps in the defense capability of its home front and are focusing their efforts to be able to conduct a long, multi-arena campaign by attacking sites essential for military and civilian functional continuity. The objective is to damage Israel's functioning, disrupt its combat capabilities, weaken its economic

and social resilience over time, and present an image of victory that would influence Israel's public consciousness.

Statements by senior Iranian figures and by their main ally, Hezbollah's Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah, as well as media reports from the past few years reveal a little about the intentions and operational capabilities that Iran and its proxies can pose for Israel in the threat profile discussed here. At the beginning of 2019, during a live broadcast marking the fortieth anniversary of the Islamic Revolution, Iran revealed the Hoveyzeh—an all-weather, surface-to-surface cruise missile with a long range of 1,350 km—named after a city in the Khuzestan Province that was almost completely destroyed during the Iran-Iraq War and is considered a symbol of bravery and sacrifice. The missile was part of a large exhibition of more than 300 advanced weapons and technologies (missiles, UAVs, munitions, aircraft, and ships) produced by Iran's military industries. Iran's defense minister, Amir Hatami, presented the missile, which cruises at a low altitude and has precision navigation systems. It is launched at short notice and has great destructive capability. He said that the cruise missile had been successfully tested at a range of 1,200 km and accurately hit its target. He also discussed the next generation of cruise missiles—the Soumar—with a range of 700 km and reportedly stationed in western Iraq, enhancing Iran's attack capabilities. In parallel, the deputy commander of the Revolutionary Guard, Hossein Salami, warned in an interview with Iran's state television that “if Israel continues to provoke war in the region, this will lead to its destruction. Israel's capabilities do not even come close to our Operation Jerusalem (Operation Bayt al-Muqaddas) . . . (Israel) will be completely erased before the United States can help it.”<sup>3</sup>

A year earlier, in February 2018, the Lebanese website Dahieh, which is identified with Hezbollah, posted an article claiming that President Bashar al-Assad of Syria had “recently” rejected Israel's demand—conveyed via Russia's President Vladimir Putin—to remove some 70,000 Iranian long-range missiles stationed throughout Syria and aimed at Israel; he even declared that the Syrian Army and Hezbollah would jointly wage a missile war against Israel. The article noted that Iranian experts were prepared to fire these missiles (the Fateh-110 and Zelzal) at Israel from every point in Lebanon and Syria and that Assad had commanded his army to help Hezbollah in order to station missiles and camouflage the launch facilities.

According to the article, the Iran-Iraq-Syria axis was vigorously working on transferring additional missiles from Iran so that Hezbollah would have half a million missiles in Syria within a year and a half, in addition to those already deployed in Lebanon.<sup>4</sup> In a special interview given on the thirteenth anniversary of the outbreak of the Second Lebanon War, Nasrallah said that his organization had diverse offensive capabilities, including infantry and drones, and that Israel has refrained from attacking out of fear that Hezbollah would “send it back to the stone age.” He added that invading the Galilee is part of his organization’s war plans and that his organization possesses missiles capable of hitting Israel’s entire coastal plain and all centers of government, nuclear sites, and ports.<sup>5</sup> Iran’s precision and long-range attack capabilities, using a variety of measures—including cruise missiles—were demonstrated in the attack on the Saudi oil facilities in September 2019.<sup>6</sup>

The boasting by Nasrallah and Iran’s leaders do not take into consideration Israel’s efforts to inhibit or prevent Iran’s buildup in Syria and Lebanon, such as Operation Northern Shield, which uncovered and destroyed the tunnels that Hezbollah had dug so its special forces could enter Israel and take over communities and army bases.<sup>7</sup> At the same time, Israel undoubtedly faces a severe threat that requires its defensive system to provide almost a complete response by successfully intercepting every missile launched toward Israel, especially if suspected of carrying an unconventional warhead (such as chemical weapons), and to intercept every precision missile aimed at Israel, particularly at a strategic site. Toward Israel’s population, the adversary could fire large salvos of missiles and rockets (precision is not needed when hitting urban areas), and thus a territorial defense that can cope with an inundation of salvos is necessary. The air defense system, however, is not a replacement for the population being disciplined and having responsible behavior, and the population must enter shelters and protected areas when warned. Severely damaging the home front that results in a large number of civilian deaths would influence the image of victory at the end of the war.

Defeating the nearest circle of enemies (especially Lebanon and the Gaza Strip) could require ground maneuvering deep into territories and launch areas beyond Israel’s border. The maneuvering force also requires air-defense in enemy territory as it is susceptible to being hit by precision munitions from both ground and air. This mission requires coping with a realm of unique challenges, primarily due to the difficulties of mobilizing the

defense system in order to defend the forces wherever they are, protecting the system from damage, and maintaining its supplies over time.

### ***Types of weapons that threaten Israel***

According to public information, the Shiite axis—led by Iran—includes the following weapons systems:

- Mortar shells, which have ranges of between several hundred meters and 7 kilometers, and have been fired from the Gaza Strip toward the communities near the Gaza border.
- Qassam rockets with ranges of between 3 and 12 kilometers have been fired from Gaza.
- Grad and improved Grad rockets that can reach ranges of between 10 and 40 kilometers. These could be fired from the Gaza Strip, Lebanon, and the Syrian Golan Heights.
- Various Fajr rockets, having a diameter of 220 millimeters and a range of 50 to 90 kilometers, could be fired from Lebanon and Syria, and the M-75 rocket could be launched from Gaza and could reach the Tel Aviv and Jerusalem.
- Zelzal and M-302 rockets, having a range of 100 to 200 kilometers and some with precious warheads, could be launched from Lebanon and Syria.
- Fateh-110 and M-600 missiles, some with precision warheads and with ranges of up to 500 kilometers, could be launched from Syria, Lebanon, and western Iraq.
- Short and medium-range ballistic missiles, with some designed trajectories, could be launched from Lebanon, Syria, and western Iraq.
- It is estimated that Israel's enemies have between 40,000 and 50,000 medium-range rockets and missiles (up to 90 kilometers).<sup>8</sup>
- Shahab-2, Scud B, C, and D missiles with ranges of 300 to 700 kilometers. These could be launched from Syria and northern Lebanon.
- Shahab-3 and Shahab-missiles, with ranges of 1,300 to 2,000 kilometers, could be launched from Iran.
- Advanced cruise missiles with precision homing capabilities. These could be fired from Iran and Iraq.<sup>9</sup>

- Unmanned aerial attack vehicles could be launched from Syria and Lebanon, while attack drones could be launched from the Gaza Strip, including in swarms.
- Coast-to-sea/coast-to-coast missiles could be launched from Lebanon and from Syria's coasts.
- Precision-guided munitions could be fired, operated by ground units positioned near the border and that even penetrate into Israel from the Lebanese border, the Syrian Golan Heights, and the Gaza Strip (via tunnels).



**Figure 1.** Distance from Iranian missile sites

In effect, the entire State of Israel could be subjected to the danger of precision strikes from one of these arenas, stretching Israel's defense systems beyond the ability to provide effective defense at all the fronts.

### ***Priority targets for attacking Israel***

- Precision missiles could be aimed at valuable strategic targets: air defense batteries (in an attempt to neutralize them), storage facilities of toxic materials, power plants, natural gas infrastructure, the Prime Minister's Office, the General Staff building, regional command headquarters, military storage facilities, air force bases, airfields, seaports, army bases, and more.
- Salvoes of hundreds of missiles could target population centers in order to effectively damage Israel's interception system, making it difficult to allocate the interceptors for the precision missiles interception and munitions aimed at Israel's sensitive and essential targets.
- Attack drones could be aimed at valuable soft targets and operated in swarms, making them difficult to neutralize.
- Coast-to-sea missiles could destroy the gas rigs and damage the Haifa Port and the fleet of ships stationed there.
- Cyberattacks could be carried out against critical infrastructure, which is essential for the continuous functioning of the state's main systems and of the IDF's command and control system. In addition, covert activity could take place on social media, creating cognitive damage by sowing terror and fear among the Israeli public and causing them to believe that the state and the army have stopped functioning.

### ***Neutralizing Israel's air defense system***

By carrying out combined barrages of all kinds of weaponry from different arenas, Israel's adversaries could make it difficult for the IDF to intercept precision missiles aimed at strategic and sensitive targets deep in Israel that are essential to the continuous functioning of the IDF's command and control system, as well as at infrastructure necessary for the functioning of the home front, such as the supply of water, electricity, and food. The effective use of the adversary's launch resources—for example, of heavy and diverse salvoes—could overcome the IDF's prioritization strategy and quickly diminish its supply of interceptors. At the same time, the IDF's kinetic interception systems could be disrupted and even neutralized via salvoes of missiles with maneuver missiles according to guidance law, which makes trajectory prediction more difficult; splitting warheads; and hypersonic missiles that are extremely difficult to intercept.

Attacks on Israel's airfields, recruitment centers, and command and control centers could disrupt the IDF's defense and recruitment capabilities and even its attack capabilities, whose purpose is to inflict heavy damage on the enemy's launch systems. Even if Israel is able to respond and sow considerable destruction in the adversary's territory and strike its strategic systems, if harm to the home front continues without the IDF being able to fully protect it, it will be increasingly difficult for Israel to create a sense of victory. In addition, rehabilitation will be delayed because the necessary systems and infrastructure no longer function.

Furthermore, the public could lose confidence in the state if the home front suffers serious harm, including a high casualty rate that has not been previously experienced. To this we must add the high cost of both fighting and defending against attacks from missiles, rockets, and the kinds of precision munitions described above. In this kind of scenario, Israel would have difficulty achieving a quick victory, and thus fighting that persists more than two weeks should be expected. This would be an extremely heavy burden on the state's budget,<sup>10</sup> including taking into account the additional damage to lives, national infrastructure, and property, as well as the likely rehabilitation costs, which could lead Israel to budgetary distress, a serious shortage of resources, and increasing dependence on the United States. Should a war erupt following a chain of events that seriously damages Israel's international standing (for example, if Jewish extremists harm the al-Aqsa Mosque), the United States and other Western states might not be so willing to immediately provide Israel with a diplomatic umbrella and with weapons supply while the international community would be paralyzed and unable to impose a quick end to the fighting.

Such a scenario could lead to a critical chain of challenges to the resilience, stability, and even future of the State of Israel. First, it could damage the state's ability to provide for the public's basic needs—water, food, electricity, security, income—and could undermine the public's confidence in the state and its institutions. Second, an inability to end the conflict could cause a series of back-to-back events, like Hamas and the Islamic Jihad in Gaza, could see this as an historic opportunity to pose an existential threat to Israel, such as by organizing mass marches of Palestinians from Gaza and from refugee camps in the West Bank toward Israel's urban centers. If Israel



harms many “returning” Palestinians, Israel would face difficulty receiving support and aid from its friends in the West.

### Possible Causes of a Missile Attack

The possibility of a surprise attack on Israel needs to be considered; however, it is more likely that a series of escalating events will motivate the adversary, particularly the Shiite axis led by Iran, to attack Israel with missiles and aerial munitions.<sup>11</sup> Escalation events could include a covert Israeli attack on sites in Iran containing nuclear development infrastructure. This kind of attack would seriously damage infrastructure, Iranian scientists, and others. Even if Israel does not assume responsibility for the attack, Iran’s leadership might blame Israel and the United States for executing it, and Iran would promise a powerful response to it, when and wherever it is suitable. Another escalation event could be an Israeli attack on precision-missile assembly sites and storage sites in Syria, Lebanon, and Iraq, which would cause extremely heavy losses to the Iranian Quds forces and Hezbollah operatives. A terrorist attack by Jewish extremists that destroys significant parts of the al-Aqsa Mosque and causes thousands of direct and/or indirect casualties in riots afterwards would also spur Israel’s enemies to take action against it.



**Figure 2.** Critical factors in the development of the threat profile

### Conclusion and Recommendations

In this chapter, we presented a threat profile in which a coalition of forces led by Iran implements a combined, multi-arena, multidimensional attack, which could include missiles and UAVs from Lebanon (Hezbollah) and Syria; ballistic missiles from Iran and Iraq; cruise missiles from Iran and Iraq; and rockets, attack drones, UAVs, and mortar shells from Gaza. These coordinated forces could exploit the military capabilities at their disposal to

suddenly launch salvoes of missiles and swarms of UAVs and drones in an attempt to paralyze military and civilian airfields in Israel, command and control posts, the IDF headquarters in Tel Aviv, interception systems, the Prime Minister's Office in Jerusalem, the Knesset, army and intelligence bases, military storage facilities, as well as civilian infrastructure systems essential for the functional continuity of the state, such as power plants, relay stations, and desalination facilities. In parallel, a massive cyberattack on state infrastructure and a cognitive warfare attack on social networks in Israel could occur, sowing fear and disseminating false information to create the impression that the attacks are more destructive than in reality.

If the enemy succeeds in launching large-scale salvoes of hundreds of missiles simultaneously from different arenas (which is a distinct possibility), Israel's air defense would likely have a difficult time coping with the threat. The result would be large-scale destruction—and death in some circumstances—within Israel's population centers. This is a threat profile that could seriously harm Israel's major cities and strategic sites via precision missiles—a scenario that Israel has never experienced—not in the First Gulf War, nor in the Second Lebanon War, nor in Operation Protective Edge. The enemy could increase the harm to the home front by attacking Israel's air defense systems with precision missiles and by carrying out cyberattacks that would damage the functioning of the IDF's command and control, and early warning systems. If the warning system is damaged, it would be difficult for civilians to remain for long in the shelters and protected spaces, and the casualties would likely be numerous.

The threat profile requires the creation of a multidisciplinary Israeli response. In the age of precision missiles and munitions, the development and implementation of a combined defense doctrine is necessary. Instead of a defense system that relies on a single interception method and opportunity against each kind of threat, various systems of interception are needed, which together provide different opportunities against each kind of threat. To this end, Israel's defense system must be strengthened using advanced measures, such as powerful laser-based interception systems, as well as having the capability to intercept a large number of objects using a single interceptor that splits into several small and deadly sub-interceptors. Furthermore, Israel needs to properly calculate the risks of offensive activities that it initiates against its adversaries' capabilities. It must also protect holy and sensitive

sites, mainly the mosques on the Temple Mount to prevent extreme and wide-ranging religious motivation to harm Israel, and ensure the maintenance of freedom of worship at these sites for all religions. In the diplomatic-military sphere, Israel must maintain its special relationship with the United States by taking into account American interests and positively receiving US initiatives, such as advancing a diplomatic process with the Palestinians.

Finally, the home front is a critical weak point in Israel's ability to cope with prolonged military campaigns. Israel's adversaries are intent on harming it mainly in order to cause heavy losses and damage and to neutralize the functional continuity of its military systems and civilian infrastructure. Although Israel actively prepares the home front for war,<sup>12</sup> it is not enough, especially not for the threat profile described here in this extreme scenario, which is based on longstanding trends in the regional threat map. The home front's ability to cope with damage and with multiple casualties requires national solidarity and a sense of justice and confidence in a responsible government that is concerned first and foremost about Israel's future. The consequences of this scenario could lead to the emigration or temporarily leaving of significant segments of the Israeli population, especially those whose presence is essential for rehabilitating the economy, infrastructure, and the special technological capabilities that characterize Israel.

Even though this extreme scenario discussed is dependent upon a series of successes by the adversary and by a number of functional and operational failures by Israel's defense system, the realization of this scenario would likely be lethal, involving direct and indirect negative consequences.

Analyzing the scenario emphasizes the need to address four dimensions that are critical to Israel's future: the enhancement of Israel's defense system; a significant improvement in Israel's ability to utilize its offensive power so that it can effectively neutralize the kind of threats discussed here; greater investment in preparing the home front for the next war, which includes enlisting the sources of strength inherent within the Israeli public; improving the protection and redundancy of essential systems and infrastructures to the functioning of the state; and the strategic need to continue to cultivate Israel's special relationship with the United States.

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# International Isolation and Boycott of Israel

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Oded Eran

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.<sup>1</sup>

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,<sup>2</sup> although this trend mainly characterizes the younger generation.<sup>3</sup> 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.<sup>4</sup> 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.<sup>5</sup>

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.<sup>6</sup> 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/>.



# The Internal Threat: The Debate about Israel's Identity

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**Pnina Sharvit Baruch**

Existential threats are not limited to external physical dangers to the state's existence; they can also be internal threats to the state's defining character and identity, which are essential both for maintaining its security pillars as well as its resilience in a challenging regional environment. In Israel's unique context, realizing this threat would signify the loss of the state's Jewish or democratic character, or it could mean the internal disintegration of Israeli society to the point of deteriorating into civil war.

Although it is difficult to predict how Israel's internal reality will develop in the coming years, we can analyze the current situation and identify factors that could transform this situation to the point Israel's identity is under threat. Internal processes that undermine society usually occur gradually, and the damage is sometimes discovered only in the final stages of the process; thus it is not enough to identify dramatic events that could create an immediate threat. Rather, we must also identify confluent trends and processes, which singularly are limited in scope, but together can lead the state in a dangerous direction. It is critical to identify these early enough to enable action when it is still possible, and before it becomes too late.

In this chapter, three threat profiles are analyzed: first, the loss of the state's democratic identity; second, the loss of the state's Jewish identity; and third, a civil war following the disintegration of Israeli society. The three scenarios are briefly presented along with the interfaces between them and

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the secondary threats that could develop as a result. The current situation is then examined in relation to each scenario. Possible causes that could influence the development of the scenarios are presented, and their possible impact on each scenario is analyzed. The chapter ends with a conclusion and policy recommendations.

## **The Threat Scenarios**

### ***The loss of the state's democratic identity***

A state's democratic identity is based, first and foremost, on the existence of formal democratic processes and institutions. The most essential requirement is holding free and credible elections, in which all citizens can vote and be elected, whatever their opinion or political stance, the results of which are determined at the ballot box according to the majority of voters. It is also crucial to maintain a system of checks and balances between the branches of government—the legislative, executive, and judicial branches. Having a functioning and independent legal system is especially important, as is law enforcement. In addition, democracy requires upholding freedom of expression, which includes also academic and cultural freedom, and a free and fearless media. A genuine democratic regime also entails maintaining democratic values, mainly respect for human rights, ensuring equality among all citizens, and protecting the rights of the minority from the will of the majority. To preserve a functioning democracy the rule of law is of utmost importance. This includes ensuring that the law is made known to the public and that the government is subject to the law. Thus, a scenario of Israel losing its democratic identity could occur when one or more of these elements is being significantly and continuously compromised.

### ***The loss of the state's Jewish identity***

Maintaining Israel's Jewish identity means safeguarding characteristics and expressions that make Israel a Jewish state. These include symbols, such as the state's flag, emblem, and anthem, and practical elements—such as having the Jewish Sabbath as the day of rest, employing Hebrew as the official language, requiring public bodies such as the army to keep kosher, and so forth, all determined in Israel's early years. Israel's unique identity as the state of the Jewish people is also expressed in the Law of Return, which states that every Jew has the right to immigrate to Israel and immediately

receive citizenship.<sup>1</sup> In addition, this special identity is expressed by Israel's commitment toward the entire Jewish people, including Jews in the diaspora. On a practical level, Israel maintains its Jewish identity by having a Jewish majority that can effectively control the state. A scenario in which Israel loses its Jewish identity could take place if it was to abolish its Jewish symbols and character or if it was to cease being the nation-state of the Jewish people.

### ***Civil war: The disintegration of Israeli society***

Israel is fragmented into different sectors who do not share the same world view. This rift within society could become a threat scenario if it leads to the outbreak of a civil war. Although the concept of "civil war" has different definitions, for the purpose of this discussion, it is defined as the existence of a violent conflict between organized groups or between an organized group and Israel's government, which would result in a significant number of casualties.<sup>2</sup>

A civil war in Israel could break out as a result of nationalist motives between Jews and Arabs or ideological-political motives between those who advocate opposing worldviews. In addition to the extreme case of a civil war, less severe cases could still have dire consequences, including civil disobedience and violent insurgency that fall short of developing into a full-fledged civil war.

### **Interfaces between the Threat Scenarios and Secondary Threats**

Some of the scenarios discussed above could cause a domino effect that extends beyond the initial threat profile. Any harm to Israel's Jewish identity, for example, could cause internal struggles among Israeli citizens and erupt in a civil war; the government could then take serious steps that restrict individual rights, such as the freedom to demonstrate and the freedom of expression, all weakening the state's democratic identity.

The realization of these threats also increases the fear that Israel's security pillars could be eroded vis-à-vis external existential threats. For example, if Israel loses its democratic identity, this could jeopardize its relations with other countries, to the point where it could be internationally isolated because it would no longer share common values with some of the Western states (the threat scenario of a severe undermining of Israel's foreign relations is examined in the previous chapter). A change in the Jewish character of the

state or its democratic character could strain its connection with diaspora Jewry; this connection has strategic importance (see the previous chapter).

Furthermore, a change in the character of the state—whether due to the loss of its democratic or Jewish identity—and a civil war or large-scale civil unrest could result in a mass emigration from Israel, especially among those who do not identify with the state's values or feel threatened. This scenario could lead to a brain drain and the loss of central pillars of Israel's economy.<sup>3</sup> Diminished investments and loss of foreign tourism in Israel due to instability could also significantly damage Israel's economy. Similarly, non-democratic steps, such as curtailing judicial supervision, could also lead to significant blows to economic growth and foreign investment in Israel.<sup>4</sup>

## **Analysis of the Current Situation**

### ***The democratic identity of the state***

As of 2019, Israeli democracy seems strong and well-established; however, we can identify processes, both in government policy and among the public, that could undermine Israel's democracy. Since the establishment of the state, Israel has maintained a formal democratic process by holding free elections and having a vibrant opposition that presents a viable alternative to the government.<sup>5</sup> In terms of freedom of expression, Israel has a lively discourse in which people can express themselves freely and criticize the government, including in the main media outlets. In addition, Israel enjoys academic and cultural freedom.

At the same time, however, we can identify attempts to undermine Israel's independent media.<sup>6</sup> In addition, some members of the government have encouraged the use of blunt, even violent, terminology against government critics, which could ultimately create an atmosphere of fear in which people will be afraid to freely express themselves. The reverberation of extreme messages in social media exacerbates this phenomenon. In addition, the government is carrying out significant steps to limit the activity and the funding of those groups it considers overly critical of its policies, especially if the criticism relates to actions carried out by Israeli military forces or to the government's security or political activity.<sup>7</sup>

Israel is committed to the respect for human rights and the principle of equality that are enshrined in legislation, especially in the Basic Law: Human Dignity and Liberty<sup>8</sup> and in Supreme Court rulings.<sup>9</sup> At the same

time, however, the Israeli government has been promoting measures that exhibit a move toward strengthening nationalist views at the expense of fully protecting the value of equality and respect for the rights of minorities. This tendency is evident in the adoption in July 2018 of the Basic Law: Israel—the Nation-State of the Jewish People (the Nation-State Law), which does not refer to the state's democratic nature nor to the principle of equality between Israel's Jewish majority and its minorities. The concern is that this law could serve to promote the Jewish national interest within the state—even at the expense of significantly compromising the principle of equality.

As a rule, Israel emphasizes its commitment to upholding human rights—including of those who are considered hostile—even during emergencies and times of war.<sup>10</sup> Accordingly, the commitment to moral conduct is incorporated into the military orders that apply to the IDF also in situations of active combat. More generally, Israeli authorities are subject to rules that protect human rights, such as the right to liberty and due process, the right to property, and so forth. However, there is a trend toward eroding these commitments driven also by government officials who argue that Israel's security interests should enjoy total precedence over individual rights, especially of those considered adversaries (such as the residents of entities fighting against Israel) or foreigners (such as infiltrators).<sup>11</sup>

The rule of law is central in Israel, and the fact that the government is subject to law is undisputed. Law enforcement agencies are able to take action against governmental officials, including investigations of incumbent prime ministers. Government decisions and actions are subject to judicial oversight and can be struck down if they fall short of legal standards, which include also the requirements of proportionality and reasonableness. There is also judicial review over legislation that does not meet constitutional demands. Beyond judicial oversight, Israel has a strong mechanism of internal legal supervision over the government that is carried out by the Attorney General's office, and the legal advisors of the government ministries and governmental agencies, including in security establishment, who are all professionally subject to the Attorney General. The Supreme Court is held in high esteem and, in general, the judicial system is comprised of professional judges who are appointed based on merit (despite some minor, albeit widely publicized, incidents).<sup>12</sup>

Nonetheless, currently a political campaign is being waged against the legal system, which has been accused of political biases. Although this campaign includes legitimate criticism of various rulings and claims of excessive judicial intervention, it has involved also attacks on the Supreme Court that deviate from legitimate criticism. For example, claims have been made repeatedly that the Supreme Court aids the enemy.<sup>13</sup> This derisive criticism harms the standing of the court in the eyes of the public<sup>14</sup> and creates a chilling effect that could increase judicial restraint even in cases which merit intervention.

Furthermore, there have been attempts to advance processes and laws that would block judicial intervention in the government's actions. For example, the proposal to add an "override clause" would enable reenacting a law that the High Court has found unconstitutional and struck down. According to the bill, in order to reenact such a law, a majority of sixty-one members of Knesset—which exists in any given coalition—would be sufficient.<sup>15</sup> Following the April 2019 elections, greater attempts were made to limit the Supreme Court, as part of the coalition negotiations for putting together a government. The newspaper *Israel Hayom* reported on these attempts as follows:

The clauses discussed during the past few days [as part of the coalition negotiations between the Likud and the Union of Right-wing Parties] include . . . a clause concerning changing the system of appointing judges, such that a hearing would take place before the judges are appointed, and the government would serve as the appointing body; changing the composition of the Supreme Court such that the current number of judges would increase by four more, and the term of judges would be limited to twelve years; limitations on the right of standing that would lead to the cancellation of public petitioners to the High Court and would allow only the specific injured party to petition the Supreme Court and request legal remedy; reducing the grounds of unreasonableness, in that the coalition would pass a law prohibiting the High Court from disqualifying laws and decisions by elected officials, including the Knesset, the government, and mayors on the grounds of unreasonableness.<sup>16</sup>

These attempts to curtail judicial power have a direct impact on respect for human rights in Israel, as it is the courts and state legal advisers that make sure that the state respects fundamental democratic values. Therefore, weakening the legal system essentially undermines the protection of these values. In addition, there have also been attempts to lessen the role of the state comptroller: For the first time in many years, a state comptroller was appointed who is not a retired judge and he publicly declared that he would refrain from criticizing the institutions of government in real time.<sup>17</sup>

Israel's continued control of Palestinians in the territories of Judea and Samaria (the West Bank) also negatively affects Israel's democracy, as does the complex reality vis-à-vis the Gaza Strip. The control over the Palestinians has created a number of challenges to Israel's democracy, given the inevitable clash between Israel's national and security interests and the rights of the Palestinians, both on the national and the individual level.<sup>18</sup>

In addition to the government's conduct, in recent years, extremist and anti-democratic voices have been able to influence and even control the public discourse, especially via social media. As a result, the discourse has become more radical, and forces in the political system—and even in the media—have aligned themselves with extremist ideas, which leads to the erosion of public support for the democratic ethos itself.<sup>19</sup>

### *The Jewish identity of the state*

Currently, there do not appear to be any processes that threaten Israel's Jewish identity. This identity is enshrined in Israel's legislation, its governmental traditions, and in the public ethos. Recently, the state's Jewish identity was strengthened by the Nation-State Law, which stipulates that the State of Israel is the nation-state of the Jewish people, and that the right to realize national self-determination in the State of Israel is unique to the Jewish people. Israel's Jewish population greatly values its Jewish character, as shown by recent polls,<sup>20</sup> and this is also the position of the vast majority of Israel's political parties. Some of the state's minorities, such as the Druze, accept the Jewish identity of the state as a rule, and even a significant number of Arab citizens acknowledge this identity.<sup>21</sup> Furthermore, for now, Israel has a solid Jewish majority within its borders. As for the connection between Israel and the Jewish communities in the diaspora, it is still strong, although there has been some distancing, especially among the younger generation.<sup>22</sup>

***Civil war***

As explained by President Reuven Rivlin in his “four tribes” speech, Israeli society today is divided into four sectors that are, in effect, four tribes: secular, national religious, ultra-Orthodox, and Arab.<sup>23</sup> According to Rivlin, however, this division is not a threat; rather, it is a reality of Israeli society. Indeed, despite the rifts in Israeli society, Israel does not seem to face the danger of deteriorating into any violent circumstances, such as civil war, violent insurgency, or large-scale civil disobedience.

***Interim summary of the situation assessment***

The above analysis shows that currently, the main threat is the first scenario or the loss of the state’s democratic identity. Although the other threats exist, the likelihood of their taking place is very low.

**Threat and Influence Factors**

Given the analysis of the current situation, what factors can make these scenarios materialize and become a severe threat to the state’s identity? In order to answer this question, a series of threat causes and influence factors are discussed below. This is not a comprehensive list, and additional unexpected circumstances obviously could emerge and cause dangerous internal processes; furthermore, some of these factors could simultaneously affect the materialization of more than one threat scenario.

***Internal processes that harm Israel’s democratic character, institutions, and values***

The Israeli government could effectively harm democratic institutions and values through various actions, which, especially in tandem, could gradually erode Israeli democracy to the point of threatening Israel’s identity as a democratic state.

The threat to democracy can be measured in varied degrees. The most unequivocal and severe threat would be to limit the possibility of carrying out free elections, which enable regimes to be changed through democratic means. This would also include attempts to thwart the existence of an independent opposition and its ability to run for government; and actions to restrict the freedom of expression, especially the ability to freely criticize



the government in the media, academic and cultural establishments, and by the general public.

Adopting policies that violate the rights of individuals and minorities, as well as the right to equality among Israel's citizens and democratic values in general, would endanger the state's substantial democratic nature. This kind of danger is more difficult to identify as sometimes it is legitimate to limit rights and values in order to advance security and national interests (including maintaining the Jewish character of the state). Therefore, it is not always easy to determine when such measures are excessive and stray from the constitutional standards or even worse, from the rules of the democratic game. For example, the removal of a Palestinian community from a specific place or for a limited period of time due to security considerations could lead to claims of excessive harm to human rights but is not necessarily a sign of the end of Israeli democracy. In contrast, mass expulsion of Palestinians for the purpose of fulfilling the state's national interests would clearly contradict Israel's existence as a democratic regime.

In addition, democracy would be significantly endangered if the rule of law—which means that the government is subject to the law and that the law is equally and truly enforced—is not upheld. In this context, legislation that grants immunity to senior officials in the state is problematic. The danger to democracy would significantly increase if the separation of powers is eroded, and if oversight bodies, such as the state comptroller, were deprived of their authority. Eliminating judicial oversight over the government and the Knesset is especially dangerous, as it would remove the independent body safeguarding the rule of law and protecting human rights against arbitrary governmental power.

Impairing any of these elements would weaken Israel's democratic regime, although a fatal blow to Israel's democracy would stem from the confluence and severity of such steps. Furthermore, a government that seeks to erode some of the elements is ultimately likely to threaten additional ones as well. For example, should the government wish to take actions that violate essential human rights, it would first weaken the judicial oversight mechanisms so that they would not block these actions and afterwards would silence critics of the government so that they would not be able to reverse these actions. It is, however, difficult to pinpoint where measures weakening Israel's democracy clearly result in a constitutional crisis that threatens its

democracy; sometimes the point of no return can only be identified after it has been crossed. On the other hand, at times, cries of apocalypse are superfluous and excessive. For our purposes, the main goal is to identify the general direction of this threat and its broad processes.

*Likelihood:* It is difficult to accurately estimate the likelihood that the democratic character of the State of Israel, in its various elements, will be compromised. It can be said that central Israeli political figures seem less committed to maintaining the democratic system of government than in the past. For instance, one can identify anti-democratic stances at the heart of the public consensus, which previously were politically marginalized,<sup>24</sup> along with the waning of the balancing and moderating forces within the political arena.

The likelihood of implementing steps that could be detrimental to Israel's democracy depends on the balance of power between forces that are pulling in opposing directions. On a positive note, there are forces that serve to strengthen Israel's democratic values and institutions, which include a democratic tradition that has prevailed since the state's establishment; a deeply rooted freedom of expression; a well-established academia; an independent media; an independent judiciary; a connection to Jewish values, some of which exemplify democratic values; a significant population that understands the importance of maintaining a democracy; the public's active involvement in the political discourse and election campaigns; educational curricula that relates to the state's democratic character; and strong connections with democratic states that have an influence on Israel.

On the other hand, factors that weaken the preservation of democratic values and institutions are noticeable: the strengthening of anti-liberal religious and nationalistic forces; a decline in the state's regard to the obligation to respect human rights; preference for national values and self-interest over democratic values as reflected in public opinion trends; diminishing the position of civil society organizations; rebranding the preservation of democracy as an elitist, "leftist," and even treasonous subject that is out of touch with the majority of the nation's true feelings; populist trends in the public discourse that are exploited by the political leadership; the state leadership's silence in the face of expressions of racism and chauvinistic nationalism and even at times its explicit support for expressions of racism; and the weakening of liberal democracy and the strengthening of nationalistic forces in the

international arena.<sup>25</sup> Some believe that the Nation-State Law has laid the foundations for denying the rights of non-Jews and that consequently, the very existence of this law in its current formulation increases the risk of future actions that would erode democracy.<sup>26</sup>

***The intervention of external forces in the election campaign and the decision-making process.***

In several election campaigns and important votes that have taken place in recent years—such as the US presidential elections and the UK referendum on Brexit—it seems that external forces, mainly Russia, had intervened in order to influence the results of the elections via disinformation campaigns and cyberattacks.

There is a concern that Israel could also be subject to information and cognitive warfare in three different spheres. First, the election process itself could be influenced by actions that encourage or discourage voting by creating doubts or apathy toward the election process or specific candidates or by promoting a candidate who suits the interests of external forces with a foreign agenda. Second, disseminating false information could undermine public confidence in the institutions of democracy, such as the courts or the law enforcement system. Third, the dissemination of false information could influence public opinion and the public's positions on strategic issues, which could then influence the decision makers.

*Likelihood:* Today Israel has considerable awareness of the risks of foreign intervention in elections. It undertakes research on the issue and has developed knowledge as well as mechanisms and methods of coping.<sup>27</sup> In the two election campaigns in 2019, Israel apparently was sufficiently prepared as no external intervention was identified. However, given the creativity of those involved in the external intervention, one must not be complacent.

***The creation of a single inegalitarian state between the Mediterranean Sea and the Jordan River***

In recent years, there has been growing discussion in Israel about the possibility of annexing Judea and Samaria and creating a single state in all the territory west of the Jordan River without granting equal civil rights to the Palestinian residents of the annexed territory. Establishing a single inegalitarian state would involve continued oppression of the Palestinian

population that is annexed to the state. The Palestinians would ultimately be denied the possibility of realizing their national aspirations and formally would be given unequal citizen status. This scenario completely contradicts the basic democratic value of formal and political equality among all of Israel's citizens and implementing it would significantly undermine Israeli democracy.<sup>28</sup>

Beyond the direct impact on the right of equality, such a move would also weaken the legal system. Assuming, as would probably be the case, that petitions are filed to the Supreme Court against this discrimination, the court would either intervene, which could lead to moves to curtail its powers and to disregarding its decisions; or it could choose not to intervene, and thus significantly harm its repute and its role in maintaining Israel's democracy. In both cases, the separation of powers and the position of an important gatekeeper in the democratic system would be compromised.

The Palestinians annexed to Israel would likely continue their national struggle for self-determination or seek their full rights as citizens of Israel. There is also a concern that Israel's Arab citizens—at least some of them—would join the national struggle, as well as some Jewish Israelis who object to such non-democratic steps. Consequently, a joint, ideologically-based, Jewish-Arab struggle could emerge against both the discriminatory reality and the violation of democracy, creating a division between the supporters of annexation and those who oppose it.

This struggle could include civil disobedience, such as mass refusal to serve in the IDF among Jews opposed to the annexation; refusal to participate in democratic institutions by large groups of people, such as Israeli Arabs; refusal to pay taxes; and mass demonstrations that could potentially deteriorate into violence and lawlessness. It is difficult, however, to assess whether such a struggle could lead to prolonged violence that would challenge the Israeli security forces and deteriorate into an actual civil war, leading to the loss of lives.

*Likelihood:* Currently, the Israeli public and the Israeli political arena do not consider the idea of a single, inegalitarian state a leading solution; however, public support for the idea of two states has diminished, while the political center has refrained from speaking out against the idea of a single state and does not take steps that could block the creeping progress toward a one-state reality. Consequently, the ideological minority could

lead Israel to slide toward a one-state reality that ultimately would become a permanent solution. In this case, the democratic identity of the state is in danger of being undermined, and the different groups within Israel could descend into violence.

***A permanent solution in which Israel continues to govern the Palestinians outside its sovereign territory***

Israel could adopt a policy that rejects the two-state solution and unilaterally decides on a permanent solution in which an irreversible reality develops of continued control over the Palestinians. For example, Israel could decide that it is annexing large parts of Area C in Judea and Samaria (about 60 percent of the total area, where the majority of the settlements are located and where between 100,000 to 300,000 Palestinians live) and provide autonomy to the Palestinians living in the remainder of the territory (mainly in Areas A and B).<sup>29</sup>

Based on the experience of applying Israeli law to East Jerusalem, the Palestinian residents of Area C likely would receive the status of permanent residents—as did the Palestinians in East Jerusalem—and would be able to apply for Israeli citizenship. Although providing the status of permanent residency to the citizens of the annexed territory and setting conditions for receiving citizenship does mean that there is a certain level of discrimination between the different populations in Israel, it does not eradicate Israel's democratic identity, just as Israel did not lose its democratic identity despite the unequal status given to the Palestinian residents of East Jerusalem.

However, if this becomes the permanent solution to the conflict, it means that Israel retains its control over all Palestinians indefinitely—either directly (those in the annexed areas) or by retaining overall control (those in Areas A and B). Continued control over all the Palestinians, without an end date and without providing them with full rights, is in essence not very different from a reality of a single state with unequal rights and bears similar ramifications for Israel's democratic nature. This is especially true if this territory then returns to being under Israel's full control (for example, should the Palestinian government collapse, due to a decision by all its members to resign or following a decision to abrogate it). Consequently, this scenario would likely clash with the democratic character of the state as in scenario 3 (a single non-egalitarian state).

*Likelihood:* As long as Israel and the Palestinians do not take any significant steps to settle the conflict between them, Israeli control over the territories in the existing format is likely to continue. Prominent officials in Israel's political system, including Prime Minister Netanyahu, have raised the idea of annexing large areas of Judea and Samaria,<sup>30</sup> and thus it is possible that annexation will be pursued. These measures could be advanced gradually until applying Israeli law to significant parts of the territory is realized while allowing for limited autonomy for the Palestinians in Areas A and B and in built-up areas adjacent to them.

### ***The creation of a single, egalitarian state between the Mediterranean Sea and the Jordan River***

One option that sometimes comes up in the Israeli public discourse is the idea of a single, egalitarian state; that is, Israel's annexation of Judea and Samaria and the provision of citizenship and equal rights to all the Palestinian residents, including the right to vote and be elected, freedom of movement, and freedom of residence in the entire territory of the state.<sup>31</sup>

By granting citizenship to over 2.5 million Palestinians living in the annexed territory,<sup>32</sup> as well as to more than 300,000 Palestinians in East Jerusalem—in addition to already having nearly a million and a half Arab citizens of Israel—Israel could eventually have a non-Jewish majority, or at least a very significant Arab minority. The loss of the state's Jewish majority—or the effective majority for the purpose of controlling the state—could lead to a change in the basic nature of the state, especially its Jewish character. The Jewish symbols of the state could be immediately and explicitly altered, such as by cancelling the Law of Return, while change could also occur gradually by constantly chipping away at these characteristics, to the point that they disappear.

Furthermore, while this idea seems to incorporate democratic values, the expected tensions between the populations and the struggles for control of the state could result in violence and countermeasures that would then violate rights and cause democracy to disintegrate. This scenario does not necessarily imply the loss of democracy; rather, it challenges democracy in a way that could cause its collapse if other measures were imposed, such as limiting human rights should a state of emergency be implemented in a reality of internal conflict. In addition, there is also the concern that if the

Jewish population becomes a minority, its rights may not be maintained by the Arab majority. This is especially the case, given the absence of a tradition of upholding democratic values in the Arab states, the conduct of the Palestinian Authority, and the severe hostility of significant segments of the Palestinian population toward the State of Israel and its Jewish citizens. The outcome could be a state under Palestinian control that does not respect the basic rights of all its citizens and, consequently, does not have a democratic identity.

By totally annexing the West Bank and establishing an egalitarian state in which the Jewish majority is threatened, there is the danger that Jews could become engaged in an internal struggle between those promoting and those opposing the move. Jews and Arabs could also face a violent struggle should some of the Jewish citizens refuse to accept the equal citizenship of millions of annexed Palestinians, who, in their eyes, are bitter enemies. A struggle could also occur should the Palestinians oppose Israel's decision to annex them and deny them the right to self-determination and additional collective rights (despite the provision of equal individual rights) and due to the prevailing view among many Palestinians that Israelis are the enemy. Furthermore, violence could break out between groups of Jews and Arabs, surrounding the character of the state and attempts of each side to impose its values on the state's institutions. In addition, the scenario could lead to insurrection and civil disobedience, including the refusal of various groups to serve in the IDF and to participate in the state's democratic institutions—as well as violent demonstrations, which could even deteriorate into civil war.

*Likelihood:* The idea of a single, egalitarian state is rejected by the vast majority of Israel's Jewish population, and currently no significant political figure promotes such a solution. Therefore, it seems that the likelihood of this scenario is low.

***Large-scale evacuation of Jewish settlements or transfer of Arab communities of the Triangle area to Palestinian sovereignty (as part of an agreement)***

As a result of diplomatic processes—whether following negotiations or unilaterally—Israel could decide upon the large-scale evacuation of settlements where tens of thousands of Israeli citizens live. In this scenario, the opponents of the evacuation would likely wage a struggle against the decision. This could result in demonstrations and clinging to homes, as occurred during

the disengagement from Gaza in 2005. However, given the radicalization of the political discourse and the ability of social media to reach tens of thousands of people, this struggle likely would draw many more participants into the streets and would be more violent than the Gaza disengagement. This scenario could—under certain circumstances—deteriorate into a civil war, although this is a far-reaching result whose probability is low.

Another course of action could be to change the status of Israel's Arab communities; that is, the transfer of the Arab communities of Israel's Triangle region to Palestinian sovereignty as part of an agreement with the Palestinians. If such a course of action were to be implemented without the agreement of the residents of these communities, they would likely respond with severe opposition that could lead to violence. However, it does not seem that such a course of action would lead to civil war, especially if it is done in agreement with the Palestinians, as there would not be additional groups to join the struggle.

*Likelihood:* Currently, there is no diplomatic settlement on the horizon that involves the large-scale evacuation of Jewish communities. However, political changes are possible—within the state and in the international arena—that could lead to such a decision in the future. Similarly, the idea of transferring the communities of the Triangle area to Palestinian sovereignty is not currently on the political agenda. In the past, this idea met with strong opposition from both the Israeli Arab residents of the Triangle communities and the Palestinians; thus its likelihood seems extremely low. It also would be impossible to implement without Palestinian agreement.

### ***Severe damage to Muslim or Christian holy sites, especially on the Temple Mount***

Israel has many sites that are holy to various religions, especially to Jews, Muslims, and Christians. The most sensitive sites are in Jerusalem. Damage to a Jewish holy site could result in a harsh response by Israel and be met with wide condemnation; it would not, however, lead to civil war. Damage to a Christian holy site would likely lead to harsh responses too, but most likely would not lead to a civil war within Israel, as Christians are a small minority in Israel. In contrast, damage to Muslim holy sites—first and foremost on the Temple Mount, and especially if the damage is severe—could lead to violent responses by the Muslim population in and outside of Israel.



Currently, Muslim and Jewish groups are already stirring up friction on the Temple Mount and the holy compound. Should the harm to the mosques be attributed, directly or indirectly, to the Israeli government, the expected response could be intense and could include large-scale riots among the Arab population in Israel, and the Palestinians in Judea, Samaria, and the Gaza Strip, similar to the events that took place on the Temple Mount in July 2017.<sup>33</sup> While those riots were stopped, in the case of significant damage to a holy place, riots could escalate out of control and even deteriorate into civil war. However, whether this would occur depends to a large extent on Israel's response, the ability of the Arab leaders to control the situation, as well as the reverberations that this kind of situation would cause in the Arab-Islamic world.

*Likelihood:* On one hand, Israel's internal security forces and the Israeli government are aware of the sensitivity of the issue and hopefully are sufficiently prepared to prevent such events; on the other hand, all it takes is one determined person or a local event that spirals out of control to lead to uncontrolled results.

***The weakening of democratic values in the international arena.***

The State of Israel recognizes the importance of being part of the family of nations in general and enlightened nations and developed states in particular. Beyond the diplomatic importance, this belonging also has practical implications in many areas, including security, economic, and cultural ramifications. One reason to maintain democratic values in Israel and ensure their respect is to prevent Israel's legitimacy in the world from being undermined and the subsequent consequences a loss of legitimacy would have for Israel's foreign relations. Indeed, fear of the international community's reaction to anti-democratic governmental activity is often more effective than internal considerations. Furthermore, external pressure enables decision makers to justify inwardly why they will not pursue undemocratic measures, despite internal political pressure to do so. If the world were to place less importance on democratic values, international pressure on Israel to respect these values would likely diminish. In addition, Israel could gain legitimacy for any undemocratic conduct should other states also act this way. The more allies Israel has that do not uphold democratic values, the easier it is for the government to adopt undemocratic standards in its policies. As

a result, national considerations could outweigh democratic considerations and lead to more nationalistic steps that erode Israel's democracy.

*Likelihood:* In recent years, there has been a global trend toward the weakening of democratic and liberal values, manifest by the increasing power of right-wing and fascist parties that challenge liberal values.<sup>34</sup> Even in the United States, the bastion of democracy, radical right-wing groups have gained strength following the election of President Donald Trump and the increasing strength of populism. As a result, voices that used to be marginalized and on the fringe have penetrated the center of the political stage, where they are undermining basic democratic values, including the rule of law, human rights, and pluralism.<sup>35</sup> It is too early to tell whether this is a passing phase or a trend that will substantially challenge democratic regimes.

Furthermore, Israel—as of 2019—has more allies whose rulers express little respect for democratic values and human rights. These include the governments of Hungary, Poland, and Brazil.<sup>36</sup> Obviously, these governments and their attitude toward Israel could change in the future.

## **Conclusion and Recommendations**

The three threat scenarios discussed in this chapter pose different levels of threats for Israel. The scenario most likely to occur is the loss of the state's democratic identity. An undemocratic reality could emerge as a result of direct actions taken by the state's government against democratic institutions and values based on worldviews that sanctify national—even nationalistic—values and disparage democratic ones. The continued erosion of the democratic ethos among the Israeli public increases the fear that basic civil and political rights upon which Israel's democracy is based could be significantly undermined.

Weakening the state's democratic identity could take place should Israel control the area of Judea and Samaria (the West Bank) as part of the State of Israel without providing full civil rights to the Palestinians residing in these areas. The inegalitarianism itself contradicts the state's democratic identity; in addition, this scenario could involve eroding the status of the gatekeepers of democracy, such as the courts and the free media, so that they would not be able to prevent the implementation of the discriminatory policy. Even without annexing the entire territory of Judea and Samaria, a threat to the democratic identity of Israel could develop as part of a unilateral permanent

solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict should Israel continue to control the majority of the territory (for example, all of Area C), by leaving the Palestinian population centers outside of the state's territory—without their being able to fulfill political or civil rights.

As for Israel's Jewish identity, at this stage, there is no significant concern that its symbols or character will be compromised. The scenario of a single, egalitarian state would endanger the Jewish character of the state, but currently, it is not politically feasible. Nevertheless, we cannot ignore the possibility that this scenario could occur in the long term as a result of various developments, such as the creation of a single state without equal rights, which could lead to an internal struggle resulting in the Palestinians taking over the government.

Another threat to the Jewish identity of the state is the detachment of the State of Israel from some segments of diaspora Jewry, especially the younger generation of American Jews. This fissure could seriously harm Israel's identity as being the state of the Jewish people.

Deterioration into a civil war does not appear to be a tangible threat at this point, although one can conceive of situations of civil disobedience or violent insurgency that could lead to civil war. This scenario could occur as a result of a reality of a state where rights are not egalitarian and democratic values dwindle. A reality of a single, egalitarian state between the Mediterranean Sea and the Jordan River, which is less likely to occur, could also lead to a civil war due to the built-in tensions between Jews and Palestinians who would live in such a state. Furthermore, civil war could erupt as a result of other courses of action, such as the large-scale evacuation of Jewish communities or following a destructive attack against holy Muslim sites on the Temple Mount. These situations could lead to large-scale violent clashes and could potentially deteriorate into civil war; however, it is doubtful whether this kind of situation could indeed escalate out of control in such a way.

Should any of these scenarios occur, this could lead to severe repercussions to Israel's quality of life and economy. Israel could face mass emigration and a brain drain of Israelis with means and alternatives, who would no longer want to continue living within the state. The weakening of Israel's democratic identity and situations of civil war would also drive away investors and would make it difficult to bring in new ones.

In order to prevent the scenarios described above, the factors that could cause them must be addressed. Three main recommendations can be made:

1. The government must refrain from pursuing policies and actions that undermine democratic values and institutions in Israel. Furthermore, the government should demonstrate a real, uncompromising commitment to maintaining a democratic regime, including the fulfillment of the principle of civil equality, respect for minority rights in Israel, and upholding the rule of law. It is also important to develop an adequate response to cognitive threats and external intervention that aim to disrupt democracy in Israel.
2. Instilling the significance of democratic values and their respect within Israel's general public is extremely important. In addition, action must be taken to strengthen the public's confidence in the government institutions in general and in the judicial and law enforcement systems in particular.
3. With regard to the Palestinian arena, the trend of moving toward a one-state reality is of concern. A state in which rights are inegalitarian contradicts democratic values, while an egalitarian state would likely clash with the state's Jewish values due to the loss of the effective Jewish majority. Both possibilities would stir up tensions that could lead to violence and even deteriorate into civil war. Maintaining a situation in which there is not a single state but rather continued control of the Palestinians without any attempt to end this control also conflicts with Israel's democratic values. Therefore, Israel must actively work toward finding a solution that ends—or at least decreases—this control and must refrain from taking any steps, such as large-scale annexation and irreversible steps on the ground, that would close off the option of reaching a future separation between Israel and the Palestinians. Furthermore, any diplomatic agreement that would involve the large-scale evacuation of Jewish communities or the transfer of Arab communities to Palestinian sovereignty would have to be carried out with due consideration to its potential impact, to avoid deterioration into a spiral of violence. In addition, it is vital to continually work to prevent damage to the holy places of the different religions, especially the al-Aqsa compound; and to be prepared in advance for such a scenario, in order to calm the situation and prevent the spread of violence in its aftermath.

## Notes

- 1 The Law of Return 1950, <https://bit.ly/2WiS7rr> [Hebrew].
- 2 For a discussion on the various definitions in the literature on civil war, see Yaron Salman, “Conditions for the Successful Implementation of Peace Agreements Following Civil Wars” (PhD diss., Hebrew University, 2013), 18–22, <https://bit.ly/2NhSyRc> [Hebrew]. A relatively broad definition of the term “civil war” was chosen for this paper, which, if all of its components exist, could fundamentally undermine the essence and identity of the state.
- 3 In this context, it is interesting to examine processes taking place in Turkey and described in Carlotta Gall, “Turks Voting with Their Feet,” *New York Times*, January 5, 2019, <https://bit.ly/2LljJYT>.
- 4 On the close connection between the two, see, for example, Adrian Filut, “Why Weakening the Courts is Dangerous for Israel’s Growth,” *Calcalist*, May 14, 2019, <https://bit.ly/2Nx7paC> [Hebrew].
- 5 A certain erosion of protecting the opposition can be seen in the law which provided the members of the Knesset with the power to remove from office another member of Knesset under certain conditions. This is a combination of the Basic Law: The Knesset (Amendment number 44), which added Article 42A(C) to the basic law, and the Knesset Law (Amendment number 43), 2016, which added Article 8A to the law. The amendments were approved in High Court of Justice decision 5744/16 *Ben Meir v. The Knesset* (published on the site of the judicial authority May 27, 2018).
- 6 An example of this is the attempt to advance a law to unify the media regulatory bodies, which aimed to subordinate statutory authorities that operate independently by law to a body controlled entirely by the Ministry of Communications. See Omri Milman, “Netanyahu Is Taking Over the Media in 65 Pages,” *Calcalist*, March 12, 2017, <https://bit.ly/2NmjCyI> [Hebrew].
- 7 See, for example, the attempt to transfer control of funding for cultural institutions to the minister of education and culture based on unprofessional criteria, as part of an amendment to the Culture and Art Law, 2002. The bill did not reach the stage of legislation.
- 8 As well as in additional legislation, such as the Prohibition of Discrimination in Products, Services and Entry into Places of Entertainment and Public Places Law, 2000; Women’s Equal Rights Law, 1951; and Equal Rights For Persons With Disabilities Law, 1998.
- 9 See, for example, High Court of Justice 6427/02 *The Movement for Quality Government in Israel v. The Knesset*, 619A (2006) [Hebrew] (the constitutionality of the Tal Law, which provided an exemption from military service for yeshiva students); High Court of Justice 1213/10 *Nir v. The Speaker of the Knesset* [Hebrew, published in Nevo, February 23, 2012] (the constitutionality of the Pardon Law for opponents of the disengagement); High Court of Justice 8300/02 *Nasr v. the Israeli Government*

- [Hebrew, published in Nevo, May 22, 2015] (discriminatory tax benefits). In all of these cases (as in many other cases), the court adopted the principle of equality and stated that it is derived from the Basic Law: Human Dignity and Liberty.
- 10 A clear example of this is respecting international humanitarian law (the law of armed conflict) and providing real protection—using all means—for the human rights of Palestinians, even when they are involved in activity against Israel.
  - 11 One can note the following examples: The Judea and Samaria Settlement Regulation Law, 2017 (The Regulation Law), which was designed to allow the retroactive regulation of Israeli communities in Judea and Samaria that were built or expanded illegally. The law effectively enables under certain circumstances the expropriation in practice of land from the Palestinian residents who claim rights to it, in return for compensation; the minister of defense’s decision to prevent Gaza residents who are related to Hamas activists to receive life-saving medical treatment in Israel (which was blocked by the High Court. See High Court of Justice 5693/18 *Siam v. the prime minister*, <https://bit.ly/2MzLtfK> [Hebrew]); expressing criticism of the investigation of soldiers suspected of unjustified harm of terrorists or civilians on the other side. An example of this is the statement by Minister Naftali Bennett that the IDF’s combat soldiers are more afraid of the military advocate general than of Yahya Sinwar, the leader of Hamas. See Yoav Zeitoun, Tova Zimuky, and Shahar Chai, “Bennett: Combat Soldiers Are More Afraid of the Military Advocate General than of Sinwar; Chief of Staff: He Is Part of the IDF’s Strength,” Ynet, November 19, 2019, <https://bit.ly/2KZajlC> [Hebrew]. These views are also common among the general public. For example, 87 percent of Jewish respondents in the Peace Index Survey published in October 2018 supported the statement that “the lives of IDF soldiers must be protected at any price, even the price of increasing the number of Palestinian civilian casualties.” See Ephraim Yaar and Tamar Hermann, “Peace Index for October 2018,” Israel Democracy Institute, <https://bit.ly/2TTA62t> [Hebrew].
  - 12 For a general overview of the Supreme Court, see Gad Barzilai, *Communities and Law: Politics and Cultures of Legal Identities* (University of Michigan Press, 2005).
  - 13 Examples include Minister Yariv Levin’s statement that “the time has come for the High Court judges to understand that their role is to defend Israel’s citizens and not those who seek to murder us” and Minister Miri Regev’s statement that “the High Court is neutralizing Israel’s citizens.” See Hezki Baruch, “Regev: High Court is Neutralizing Israel’s Citizens,” *Arutz Sheva*, October 22, 2015, <https://bit.ly/2KQm9zs> [Hebrew]; Minister Naftali Bennett said that “in the election we want to defeat Hamas and the High Court,” *Kikar HaShabbat*, March 12, 2019, <https://bit.ly/2KRzPtS> [Hebrew].
  - 14 See the decline in the level of confidence that the Jewish public has in the Supreme Court in 2018 compared to the average in the years beforehand: 55 percent in 2018 versus a multi-year average of 62.6 percent; or, comparing two specific years: 55

- percent in 2018 versus over 73 percent in 2012. See *Israeli Democracy Index* (2018): 92, <https://bit.ly/2t1ZV3M> [Hebrew].
- 15 Several attempts have been made to advance the override clause—so far unsuccessfully. The most prominent was then MK Ayelet Shaked's attempt in 2013. See 1944/19/P Proposed Basic Law: Human Dignity and Liberty (Amendment – Validity of Exceptional Law), <https://bit.ly/31WTFtx> [Hebrew].
  - 16 Mati Tuchfeld, "The Override Clause Is Just the Beginning: This Is What the Great Revolution in the Legal System Will Look Like," *Israel Hayom*, May 12, 2019, <https://bit.ly/2LDocJO> [Hebrew].
  - 17 Tova Zimuky and Moran Azulay, "New State Comptroller: 'We Will Not Intervene in Decision-making Processes,'" *Ynet*, July 1, 2019, <https://bit.ly/30rrJxy> [Hebrew].
  - 18 For more on this, see Pnina Sharvit Baruch, "Is Israeli Democracy at Risk?" In *Strategic Survey for Israel 2018–2019*, edited by Anat Kurz and Shlomo Brom (Tel Aviv: Institute for National Security Studies, December 2018), <https://www.inss.org.il/publication/israeli-democracy-risk/>.
  - 19 According to the 2017 Israeli Democracy Index, 41 percent of Jews and 65 percent of Arabs agreed or very much agreed with the statement that Israeli democracy is in danger. See *Israeli Democracy Index* (2017): 89, <https://bit.ly/2KSFtZW> [Hebrew].
  - 20 See *Israeli Democracy Index* (2018): 69–70, <https://bit.ly/2t1ZV3M> [in Hebrew].
  - 21 Arik Rudnitzky, *The Arab Minority in Israel and the Discourse on the 'Jewish State'* (Jerusalem: Israel Democracy Institute, 2015), p. 13, <https://bit.ly/2IgggKY> [Hebrew].
  - 22 See the discussion in the previous chapter.
  - 23 The president's speech at the Herzliya Conference, June 2015, <https://bit.ly/30tgVPG> [in Hebrew]. For a summary of the speech, see <https://bit.ly/2ZjKmGB> [Hebrew].
  - 24 An example of this is the legitimacy given to the Otzma Yehudit party, whose positions are anti-democratic, by Prime Minister Netanyahu and the Likud party.
  - 25 See below an analysis of this component.
  - 26 See Eyal Benvenisti and Doreen Lustig, "The Nationalism Potion," *ICON-S-IL* (blog), October 24, 2018, <https://bit.ly/2PSIrRi> [in Hebrew].
  - 27 Ron Shamir and Eli Bahar, *How to Cope With Cyberattacks on the Election Campaign*, Policy Study 136 (Jerusalem: Israel Democracy Institute, 2019), <https://bit.ly/2HoxlBb> [Hebrew].
  - 28 See also the analysis in Commanders for Israel's Security, "Annexation Steps in Judea and Samaria—Consequences," September 2018, <https://bit.ly/2EFygxy> [Hebrew].
  - 29 For a description of this, see *ibid.*, 8–13.
  - 30 Maariv online, "Netanyahu: 'We Will Apply Israeli Sovereignty in Judea and Samaria Gradually, Not Only to the Settlement Blocs,'" *Maariv*, April 6, 2019, <https://bit.ly/2Zq4VB0> [Hebrew]; Tal Shalev, "Netanyahu: Upon Forming the Government

- We Will Apply Sovereignty to the Jordan Valley,” *Walla*, September 10, 2019, <https://bit.ly/2IIIf2Pu> [Hebrew].
- 31 See, for example, George Bisharat, “A One-State Solution for Israel and Palestine,” *Huffington Post*, October 4, 2012, <https://bit.ly/320Yylh>; Carolina Landsmann, “Ahmad Tibi Is Already Ready to Be Prime Minister of the Single State” *Haaretz*, March 2, 2017, <https://bit.ly/31XP8qE> [Hebrew].
- 32 It is worth mentioning that there is disagreement about the exact number, but even according to minimalist estimates there are at least 2 million people. According to a *Ynet* report, the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics estimates that some 2.881 million Palestinians live in Judea and Samaria. See Elior Levy, “The Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics in Up-to-date Statistics: 4.7 Million Palestinians Live in the West Bank and Gaza,” *Ynet*, March 28, 2018, <https://bit.ly/2PchU5C> [Hebrew]. According to a report from 2016 on the Mida website, in a meeting of the Knesset’s Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee (the minutes of the meeting are classified), Yoram Ettinger—a member of the American-Israeli Demographic Research Team—believed the number was 1.75 million Palestinians as of 2016. In contrast, the demographer Prof. Sergio Della Pergola claimed that the number was 2.4 million Palestinians. A special meeting of the committee was convened due to these serious disagreements regarding the demographic figures. In addition, even official governmental representatives are not certain about the figures. See Matan Asher, “So How Many Palestinians Are There Really?” *Mida*, June 7, 2016, <https://bit.ly/2U3sWfr> [Hebrew]. In 2013, the demographer Prof. Arnon Soffer harshly criticized the findings of the Israeli-American Demography Team and believed that the number of Palestinians living in Judea and Samaria was 2.5 million. See Nir Hasson, “Despite the Right’s Claims: Official Document Shows That 2.6 Million Palestinians Live in the West Bank,” *Haaretz*, June 30, 2013, <https://bit.ly/2L7AeaD> [Hebrew].
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## Conclusions and Recommendations

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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.

## Authors

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## INSS Memoranda, March 2019–Present

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- No. 203, September 2020, Ofir Winter, ed., *Existential Threat Scenarios to the State of Israel*.
- No. 202, July 2020, Sasson Hadad, Tomer Fadlon, and Shmuel Even, eds., *Israel's Defense Industry and US Security Aid*.
- No. 201, May 2020, Sasson Hadad, Tomer Fadlon, and Shmuel Even, eds., *Israel's Defense Industry and US Security Aid* [Hebrew].
- No. 200, May 2020, Zipi Israeli, *The National Security Index: Trends in Israeli Public Opinion* [Hebrew].
- No. 199, May 2020, Kobi Michael and Michal Hatuel-Radoshitzky, *Seventy Years to UNRWA – Time for Structural and Functional Reforms* [Hebrew].
- No. 198, December 2019, Ofir Winter, ed., *Nothing is Forever: Existential Threats to the State of Israel* [Hebrew].
- No. 197, October 2019, Yossi Kuperwasser and David Siman-Tov, eds., *The Cognitive Campaign: Strategic and Intelligence Perspectives*.
- No. 196, September 2019, Gadi Eisenkot and Gabi Siboni, *Guidelines for Israel's National Security Strategy*.
- No. 195, September 2019, Carmit Padan and Vera Michlin-Shapir, eds., *National Security in a "Liquid" World*.
- No. 194, August 2019, Assaf Orion and Galia Lavi, eds., *Israel-China Relations: Opportunities and Challenges*.
- No. 193, July 2019, Yoel Guzansky with Miriam Goldman and Elise Steinberg, *Between Resilience and Revolution: Regime Stability in the Gulf Monarchies*.
- No. 192, July 2019, Gabi Siboni, *Guidelines for a National Protection Strategy* [Hebrew].
- No. 191, May 2019, Yossi Kuperwasser and David Siman-Tov, eds., *The Cognitive Campaign: Strategic and Intelligence Perspectives* [Hebrew].
- No. 190, April 2019, Gabi Siboni and Ido Sivan-Sevilla, *Regulation in Cyberspace*.
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During its more than seventy years of existence, the State of Israel has developed impressive military, economic, and diplomatic strengths; has become an undeniable fact; and has been recognized by some of its neighbors. Nonetheless, despite its impressive achievements, Israel still continues to cope with security challenges, including enemies who call for and seek its destruction. This study provides a contemporary analysis of the severe potential threats 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 the framework of the research, we analyzed five threat scenarios: the formation of a regional military coalition against Israel; multipolar nuclearization in the Middle East; the collapse of the Israeli defense systems due to a large-scale precision-missile attack led by Iran and its proxies; international isolation and a boycott of Israel; the disintegration of Israel's social cohesion, and the loss of its identity as a Jewish and democratic state. For each scenario, the research teams examined possible causes, accelerating and inhibiting factors, secondary threats that accompany the main threats, and security pillars that need to be maintained and strengthened in order to defend against these threats.

From an analysis of the threat scenarios, the strengths of Israel's security pillars become clear; however, internal, regional, and international processes are liable to erode and undermine them, disrupting the balance of forces between Israel and its possible adversaries and strengthening the possibility that the potential existential threats will materialize in the future. Given the conclusions of the research, we have made specific and general recommendations for the decision makers, intended to provide a comprehensive response to the threat scenarios, while using the various tools that Israel has at its disposal.

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